THE MYSTERY OF THE HILLS

RUBY M. DOYLE

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Sol set out to look for the chestnut colt.

THE MYSTERY OF THE HILLS

BY

RUBY M. DOYLE

SYDNEY

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TO

W. R. CHARLTON, Esq.

Editor of the "Sydney Mail"

Who has always given me warm encouragement
and practical help

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	INTRODUCES AGNES AND ANNETTE	1
II.	VINTAGE TIME AT TARAWINGEE	6
III.	THE LOVERS	19
IV.	THE VINTAGE BALL	33
V.	CONFIDENCES	55
VI.	A VISIT TO BUNGAY	69
VII.	THE KILLING OF THE WHITE DINGO	82
VIII.	AGNES RECEIVES A PROPOSAL	99
IX.	JEALOUSY	119
X.	HEARTACHE	138
XI.	CYNICISM	148
XII.	IN TARAWINGEE CELLARS	153
XIII.	THE CATTLE SALE AT WILTON	174
XIV.	AGNES MEETS OLD FRIENDS	195
XV.	INTRODUCES DARK BEN	210
XVI.	WHEREIN AGNES FINDS COMFORT	227
XVII.	THE BUSH FIRE	233
XVIII.	SOL'S PURSUIT OF THE CHESTNUT COLT	267

CHAPTER		PAGE
XIX.	TOM MARCHMONT MAKES A DISCOVERY	279
XX.	THE ELECTION	292
XXI.	THE MYSTERIOUS ROBBERIES	311
XXII.	REVENGE	321
XXIII.	THE SKELETON IN THE MARCHMONT CUPBOARD	331
XXIV.	ARTHUR MARCHMONT'S LAST ADVENTURE	341
XXV.	THE MYSTERY GROWS CLEARER	347
XXVI.	THE FIGHT ON THE PLATEAU	350
XXVII.	ZILLAH'S RETURN	356
XXVIII.	HAPPINESS	360

CHAPTER I

Introduces Agnes and Annette

IT was at that time of the year when the shy feathered denizens of the forest were building their nests, when the orchards were heavy in bloom, and the wild Kennedia purpled every road and rough bush track. The little girl's fingers ached to undo the stiff strings of her bonnet. Annette tried to catch her sister's eyes to ask if she might, but her sister had evidently forgotten that she was sitting there—so straight, too—on her high, stiff-backed chair.

Her sister and the lady whom they were visiting had been talking a very long time, the little girl thought. She had grown tired of gazing at the pictures and the big vases in the fireplace, all gold, with wonderful birds circling round them. Even the beautiful collection of wax flowers standing under their glass shade in the centre of the round table failed to enthrall her any longer. She slipped from her chair and walked softly across the white matting to one

of the open windows. There were a great many, for the room was very large. Annette went to one that looked out upon the garden. A delightful little building stood not far off, filled with birds, gay and sombre feathered, the sound of their twittering voices rising sweet and clear in the noon silence.

In her sudden interest Annette forgot that her sister and the lady were talking, their voices now high, now low. The faint tinkle of silver upon china sent her eyes roving to the far end of the room. A maid was busily arranging a tea table. Annette felt her weariness suddenly deserting her as she saw the big iced cake and the plate of thin bread and butter. She glanced at Agnes. How pretty she was! That sweet sprigged muslin showed up the whiteness of her skin, and the forget-me-nots on it were not bluer than her eyes. Annette felt proud of her sister. She herself was so dark, with brown eyes and hands stained liked walnuts. She sighed ever so little; but with that iced cake in the near future who could be sad? She felt very prim and good that afternoon. There was not a spot on her own short white frock and, except for the starch that Katrin had put in her bonnet strings, she would have been perfectly happy.

One of the French windows opening on to the verandah suddenly flew wide open, and two boys rushed in helter-skelter, one in hot pursuit of the other. Annette drew back in alarm. What rude creatures they were! A howl from the pursued one brought his mother to the rescue.

"Benjamin," she said, "why did you hit Thomas?"

"Didn't" said Benjamin sulkily, as he scowled at Agnes.

"You did," roared his brother.

Suddenly they were aware of Annette's presence. A girl! There was no mistaking the glance of scorn in Benjamin's hazel eyes. He promptly retired under the sofa. Thomas foolishly sat on it and stared at her. Even under her brown skin Annette felt the colour rising, and she moved nearer Agnes.

"Tired, dear?" asked her sister kindly, as she undid the annoying strings, and took the bonnet off.

For a second Annette breathed quite evenly; then Thomas jumped like a jack-in-the-box and split the air with his yells. Mrs. Marchmont rushed to the sofa.

Agnes laughed quietly to herself, and

smoothed the crumpled strings of Annette's sun-bonnet.

"He—he pinched me," bellowed Thomas.

"Never," muttered a voice under the sofa.

"Benjamin," said his mother, "go upstairs to the bathroom; and, Thomas, sit on the other side of the room."

Annette waited to see the culprit crawl out; but Benjamin did not stir. Her eyes grew round in alarm. Two fibs in one afternoon, and frank disobedience on top of them! What a bad little boy he must be! She almost dropped her piece of cake as she saw his eyes glaring up at her from under the sofa.

Mrs. Marchmont was talking again to Agnes.

Just then Hal, her big brother came in, and while he was there, Benjamin allowed Annette to eat her cake in peace.

Then Agnes tied her bonnet on again and they went out to where the horses waited with the double buggy.

"You have a long drive," said Mrs. Marchmont.

"Yes," laughed Agnes, "twenty very rough ones, but we felt we could not pass Tarawingee without calling in."

"I am always glad to see you, Agnes," replied Mrs. Marchmont. Kissing Annette and helping

her up the high step, she put a parcel into the little girl's hands, and smiled into brown eyes which danced in pleasant anticipation as their owner stammered shy thanks. Glancing up, she saw Benjamin and Thomas staring at her from a window. Their heads disappeared at once, and though she hurt her neck gazing back and waving to Mrs. Marchmont, she did not see them again.

It grew dark as they drove home. At a funny old way-side house they pulled up and had tea.

"Just 'am and heggs," the stout old landlady promised them, "and a slice of bacon for a rilish."

Annette was not allowed the slice of bacon at night, but the sight of her new doll proved ample recompense.

"What a kind lady Mrs. Marchmont is," she whispered to Agnes across the table. But Agnes was staring dreamily out through the open door at the deepening twilight, and did not seem to hear her for she only murmured, "the vintage ball."

Hal laughed kindly at the little girl's puzzled expression, and soon after they were once more driving along a shadowy forest road.

CHAPTER II

Vintage Time at Tarawingee

VALLEY and hill wilted under February's heat. Orchards, drooping with their burden of fruit, dotted the ridges in vast irregular patches. Beneath still leaves birds sucked luscious juices, boring holes through soft ripe skins. Lower than the orchards, and running along the flats and lesser ridges, were the vineyards. They stretched for miles, divided only by low grey fences or thin stone walls.

In Tarawingee vineyards the grape pickers worked deftly, swiftly, and save for an occasional word or short laugh, almost silently. Men and boys, stationed at intervals, discharged small shot into the air as chattering flocks of birds descended upon the vineyard. With cries of alarm the feathered thieves would circle longingly over this El Dorado, then rise with a whirr of frightened wings into the blue of a cloudless sky, while the men refilled their guns in readiness for the next battalion.

In the cellars beneath the house the air was resonant with speech and laughter, rough mirth and sometimes rougher words. Benjamin and Thomas, listening, small eyes and ears alert, felt that manhood must surely be a grand pinnacle wherefrom to view the world. On Benjamin the words jarred unconsciously, and the laughter was often incomprehensible, yet he longed to be a man.

Thomas, watching with young dreamy eyes, felt the bustle of life and the fever of accomplishment running through his youthful veins, and wooed his adolescence subconsciously and with deep secret longing. Both to Benjamin and Thomas the men were well nigh demi-gods.

Old Tim, the sailor, was a hero of romance, with countless sea yarns of stirring adventure stored within his iron-grey head. His much tattooed arms were a very necessary adjunct to the charm.

Sol, the head stockman, was a veritable king. With his long, crooked nose, thin, wide mouth, his high nasal voice, and an eye with its occasional squint, he represented to the boys all that was enchanting in the great Bushland of their country—all its mystery, its sadness, its mirth, its deep inscrutability, as it watched men and women brave its frank disapproval of their

further encroachment into its silent, tree-locked heart.

These two, above the rest, the boys loved. The others migrated from one vineyard to another; Sol and Tim were fixtures, having lived many years at Tarawingee, or on its out stations.

Thud—thud—down went the great crushers in the grape filled vats. Purple juice stained the feet and hands of the men, squirting even to their heated faces. Kegs filled with the bursting lobes were emptied in one after another, to be reduced to pulp by the heavy crushers. Benjamin, eating his bunch of grapes in a corner of the cellar, snuffed the fragrance of the air until his dark, curly head began to ache; but he stayed on, not wishing to leave this delightful place, pungent with fermenting juice, purple and slippery with fruit stains.

Thomas, feeling it too overpowering, got down from his perch on an overturned wine keg, and walking stiffly past his brother, ascended a flight of stone steps and so emerged into the heat and beauty of the day. Under the acacias the shadows played hide-and-seek with the golden sun-shafts, and here on the cemented pathway leading to the house, Thomas paused to survey his pet cockatoo. The cockatoo

paused also in its slow and dignified ramble, and eyed Thomas up and down with an air of great thoughtfulness. Was it a teasing, petting or scolding he read in his young master's eye? His topknot of yellow feathers rose stiffly in his perplexity, and he put out a hard little tongue once or twice before remarking, "Clear the way, clear the way."

Thomas laughed. "How are you, Cocky?" he asked, stooping quickly. With a swift backward run the bird answered politely, "Quite well, thank you. How's yourself?"

"Very sleepy," answered the boy, catching his pet, who resisted slightly, muttering: "Let me go! Let me go! Can't you 'ear me?" As Thomas refused to heed, the old bird pecked at him. "Grapes," he screamed. "I want grapes. Can't you 'ear me?" Thomas turned and retraced his steps back to the cellar.

"Throw me a bunch of grapes, Ben," he called, "Cocky wants some."

His brother walked languidly to a cask, selected a small bunch and threw it across. Cocky forestalled his master's outstretched hand, catching the bunch in his strong grey beak.

"Ain't they fine," he screamed, gobbling a few greedily.

"Yes, ain't they?" said one of the men, as

he emptied another keg of grapes into one of the deep vats. "Be keerful, Cocky, or you'll be three sheets in the wind afore yer know where yer are."

Cocky was too busy enjoying himself to take any notice.

"Thomas, Thomas," a voice was calling from somewhere overhead.

"Yes, mother, coming!" he answered, slowly ascending the steps once more to the cemented pathway.

"What have you done with your father's gold paint?" called his mother impatiently. "He is in the drawing room waiting for it."

The boy walked slowly towards the aviary, which showed plainly through the small wicket gate at the lower end of the pathway. He had been painting the canary's swinging bars, and had forgotten to replace the bottle of gold paint on his father's shelf.

"Hurry," his father's voice could be heard from one of the drawing room windows.

Up the cemented pathway once more and up, up a great flight of shallow stone steps to the cool dark hallway. He found his father very busy decorating the drawing room. Pictures were off the walls and standing along the side waiting to be re-gilt; vases were being touched

up and dusted, rosewood chairs and cabinets of walnut shone beautifully from their recent polishing. An antimacassar of some rich yellow Indian stuff trailed on the floor. Thomas inadvertently tripped over it.

"What are you doing?" asked his father sharply, "Use your eyes, boy. Here bring the paint and hold this picture while I gild the frame. I don't know what makes them get black so quickly."

The boy did as his father bade him. His mother entered the room presently with a cup of milk and a slice of cake in her hands.

"Take it away, Louisa," said her husband testily. "You spoil the boy. Can't you see he is assisting me?"

But Thomas had seized the cake and buried his nose in the cup. "Thank you, mum," he said, handing it back.

"Well, Henry," said Mrs. Marchmont, addressing her husband, "What changes are we to have in here?" Her eyes were on the waiting pictures and on the vases ranged in a row beside the fireplace.

Mr. Marchmont laid aside his small brush and turned to show his wife his freshly planned improvements. His was a nature in which the artistic element predominated. Highly cul-

tured, with a strong leaning towards a public career, he was entirely out of his element as merely the country gentleman. An unexpected legacy had caused him to throw up his profession of law in the city, and in middle life he had settled down to learn the management of the land, and of wine-making in particular. If ever there was a case of a square peg in a round hole, his was one. Transplanted from his rightful environment in the busy city centres, where his brain found itself with others as quick, the bush—wild, silent, inexpressibly monotonous to such a man— seemed to exercise a deteriorating influence on his whole nature. For a time he struggled valiantly against it, organized and attended meetings for the good of the district, erected churches, built houses, halls and schools in many a small settlement devoid of them, arranged his house to pink of perfection, and upset it again merely for the pleasure of repeating his work.

While he busied himself like this, his wife did not see the huge mistake he had made. She was content to think him happy. And for a time, wrapped up in his new life, and full of rightfully placed zeal for the country and his own special district in particular, he really did imagine himself happy. That jealousy which

often baulked him in his cherished plans, but served to encourage him to further efforts.

Just now he was fixing his drawing room for the ball, which every year marked the close of the vintage. His wife left it entirely to him, perfectly sure that "Henry" knew better than anyone what should be done. Her part was to admire and praise.

While his father showed his mother the various changes he intended making, Thomas slipped from the room and retired with a book to a tiny alcove in the dining room. Both parents failed to notice his departure.

"See, Louisa," said Mr. Marchmont, "I mean to have this piano drawn out of the corner where you so foolishly had it placed." He paused here, so that Louisa might recognize her foolishness.

"I see, Henry. Yes, it does muffle the sound when it is so close to the wall." answered his wife, pleasantly.

"Of course," said Mr. Marchmont, drawing out a silk handkerchief to stifle a sudden sneeze.

"The back shall be draped with that beautiful Indian scarf I have. You remember, Louisa?" interrogatively. His wife nodded. "And how is the mantel to be arranged?" she queried with very real interest. Mr. Marchmont turned to

where an immense pier glass reflected the room behind them.

"I have not quite made up my mind," he answered with his head on one side, as he studied the possibilities of the mantel. "I may have those tall vases so that one can see their reflection in the glass. They really look extremely well, Louisa." Mr. Marchmont dived to the other end of the room, selected a vase, and placed it in front of the wide mirror.

"See, Louisa!" he said, standing back to view the effect, with decidedly complacent approval of his own decorative abilities.

"Yes, very pretty, Henry. You really have excellent taste," praised Mrs. Marchmont, also standing back and admiring the poise of the handsome vase. Beautiful pottery was a craze with her husband. The house was filled with curiously-shaped bowls, jugs, vases, some brilliant, almost bizarre in colouring, others so delicate that one was afraid to touch them. Of pictures, too, he was passionately fond, and not a few really good ones were to be found scattered throughout the house.

"We will have the centre of the floor polished for dancing," continued Mr. Marchmont, moving a chair of dark rosewood as he spoke. "These," indicating settees, sofas, chairs and stools, "can

be either placed round the walls or can stand in the hall. Some can go on the verandah. I trust you are seeing to the supper, Louisa?"

"I'm sure it will surpass any we have yet had," answered his wife, stooping to pick up the silken antimacassar. "Don't worry over it, Henry. When will this be finished? Remember, the Wiseman's and Arthur Wilsonholme arrive to-day."

"Do they? Well Agnes Wiseman will be able to come and appreciate my efforts. She really is a very intelligent girl, I find. Do you not think so?"

"She is a very sweet girl," said his wife moving towards the door.

"Louisa!" Her husband's voice echoed after her as she went down the hall.

"Yes, Henry?"

"Send one of those boys in here, will you? I want him to hold this picture while I re-gild the frame."

Thomas in his alcove heard, but instead of going to his father's assistance he drew the dull red curtains closer across the opening of the recess. "Bother," he murmured, inaudibly.

"Thomas, Thomas," his mother's voice floated through the room. "Where are you, Thomas?" Receiving no answer, she went down the hall,

and presently Thomas heard her calling, "Benjamin! Benjamin! Your father wants you."

Thomas forgot to listen whether his brother answered the summons, for just then he arrived at a thrilling chapter in his book.

It was late in the afternoon when the Wiseman's arrived. Benjamin saw them driving down the road from the gate at the top of the paddock. Behind the buggy rode a solitary horseman.

Hands behind his back, Mr. Marchmont was perambulating under the acacias evolving some drastic scheme for the annihilation of caterpillars. They had eaten his vines badly that year. He was quite unaware of the fact that Thomas walked behind him, holding a stone between his grubby fingers. In his turn Thomas was not aware that the white cockatoo, wondering what it was all about, had strolled up to investigate, and now strutted solemnly behind his young master with a viligant eye on developments. "A slight solution of turpentine, perhaps," mused Mr. Marchmont, aloud, fixing his coat-tails and clasping his hands, palm outwards, behind his back. Thomas gently dropped the stone into them. The cockatoo saw and darted swiftly at the boy's heels, retiring before he had quite reached them.

Undisturbed, Mr. Marchmont calmly let the stone fall to the ground, and continued his meditations. Thomas quietly picked up the stone and proceeded after his father. The cockatoo strolled after Thomas.

"Turpentine," said Mr. Marchmont, pausing a moment, "mixed with a little acetic acid, ought to have some effect if sprinkled over the leaves." Thomas grinned and gently placed the stone again into the open hand. Again the cockatoo darted at his master's heels in pretended annoyance. Mr. Marchmont's reverie was very deep, for again the stone rolled noisily on the cement. For a quarter of an hour this little comedy had been going on, the cockatoo entering into the fun of the thing and darting at the boy's heels each time he put the stone into his unconscious parent's hands.

Benjamin had bolted to the buggy-shed, and with his eye glued on an opening between two slabs, watched the approaching visitors, but did not see Thomas and his father. Gazing up the paddock, his quick eye espied Annette seated between her sister and brother.

"Bother it," he muttered, "that girl coming again!"

He watched Hal leap from the buggy and lift her out, then saw his mother come from the

house, arrayed in her pretty lilac silk, and take the little girl in her arms and kiss her.

"Poof," said Benjamin, "what on earth are girls good for?"

His father, Thomas and the cockatoo came into line of vision. With a mad rush and an Indian war-whoop, he ran from the shed and tore down upon his brother and the cockatoo. "Make way for the Bengal tiger," he yelled frantically.

The cockatoo fled with a screech of rage. Thomas dodged, and Mr. Marchmont stood still in astonishment. "Boys," he began severely, then saw the visitors, and went over to join his wife in welcoming them. The horseman had dismounted and was busy unsaddling. Annette, the little girl was watching him critically.

Some time after, as she sat with her sister Agnes at the open window of their bedroom, gazing over the green fields and darker vineyards and at the undulating hills, purple in the distance, she saw two boys on spirited taffy ponies scampering madly about the paddocks.

"Agnes," said Annette gravely, "are boys any good?"

Laughing, Agnes kissed her sister's brown curls.

CHAPTER III

The Lovers

THE following day was a very busy one. Men and maids ran hither and thither, directed now by Mrs. Marchmont from the kitchen, where she presided in a whirlwind of preparation, or by Mr. Marchmont, who, aided by Agnes, Arthur Wilsonholme and a more recently arrived visitor, was putting the finishing touches to the big drawing room. Hospitable and excited, Mr. Marchmont bustled from corner to corner of the immense room, now summoning Agnes to admire a picture or to express her opinion as to suitable positions for chairs and sofas, anon setting Arthur Wilsonholme to extracting stray tacks left in the floor, and overlooked since the lifting of the carpet. The third visitor, a tall grey-haired man busied himself by spilling some polishing mixture over the floor. This, he tested, every now and then, by performing a step from the schottische.

"I trust it is right, Mr. Antrobus?" said his host at last, as he turned with Agnes from

arranging the silk antimacassar to even greater perfection.

"Splendid, splendid, Mr. Marchmont," answered his guest glancing up with a smile. His eyes rested on Agnes's fair face instead of Mr. Marchmont's heated visage. Agnes smiled back at him.

"You and Arthur are delightfully busy," she said gaily.

Wilsonholme looked up from the obstinate tack with which he was just then struggling and also smiled. "Awfully hard—some of them—," he gasped as the tack came out with a jerk that threw him back on to his heels. Agnes laughed merrily, and the young man flushed quickly.

"Come now, that's too bad, Miss Wiseman?" expostulated Guy Antrobus.

"What is it?" enquired Mr. Marchmont hastily. He had not noticed the young fellow's confusion, so occupied had he been with his final touches to the room.

"Nothing, nothing," growled Arthur Wilsonholme, who was bending over another tack to hide his heated face from Agnes's quizzing eyes.

"Where is Mr. Forbes?" asked Mr. Marchmont presently. But no one heeded his question, for just then a trio of warmly flushed girls entered the room. They had been helping Mrs.

Marchmont in the pantry. Mischief gleamed in their eyes, merriment in their smiling faces.

"Agnes," they cried all together, "Mrs. Marchmont would like you to see if there are any ferns in the fernery that would look well in here or in the hall. Can you go?"

"Yes, I think so," answered Agnes, wondering for a moment why they had not gone themselves.

"Mr. Antrobus and Mr. Wilsonholme," cried the girls simultaneously as both seemed about to follow Agnes from the room. "Would you be so kind as to—."

Agnes did not hear the end of the sentence, for at that moment she tripped over the hem of her frock and tore it so badly that she was obliged to go to her room for a needle.

The whole house was filled with the noise and bustle of preparation, though strange to say, the voices of Benjamin and Thomas could not be heard. They had gone fishing in the creek which ran past the house at the foot of the garden. At breakfast they had remarked loudly that girls would be in the way, so Annette, who secretly longed to go, had taken her doll into the garden, where she now sat, beneath one of the huge pines which grew there. She was a happy little soul, and drew much amusement

from watching the scampering maids and bustling men. The excited form of Mr. Marchmont made her feel she wanted to laugh, and the slender, pretty figure of Mrs. Marchmont brought a tender smile about her childish lips. As she sat there, with the wind whispering in the pine branches overhead, she was suddenly aware of a tall young man walking down the path. He did not appear to see her, for he was gazing straight ahead and was whistling gaily.

"He looks like a Prince in my book of fairy tales," said Annette to her doll. "I wonder if he will see me. If we sit as quiet as mice, he might go by, dolly." She leaned against the pine tree and watched the young man approach. Quite suddenly he saw her.

"Hullo!" he said, pausing in his brisk walk.

"Good morning," said Annette primly, arranging her doll's pinafore so that the lace might show to better advantage.

"Who are you?" asked the young man curiously.

"Annette Wiseman," answered the little girl with a slight effort over the long names.

"Ho! ho! are you?" he cried, coming closer and eyeing her frankly.

"And this is Annette Wiseman's doll?" he

queried, gaily smiling, so that Annette could see his gold-filled teeth.

"Yes," she nodded, "her name is Muriel."

"Ho! ho!" suddenly sitting down beside the little girl and picking Muriel up so that he might see her beautiful eyes. Annette felt sure that that was the reason.

"I wonder if Annette Wiseman has seen anyone go past?" The young man tilted his straw hat over his eyes and look quizzically down upon her.

"Only Sol," she answered slowly.

"H'm," he mused. "They told me she went along this path to the plum trees. It is quite possible they were having a little fun on my account."

"Sure?" he questioned Annette, again bending towards her.

"Yes," she said, her child's eyes round and very serious. "Only old Sol and the boys went to the creek with their fishing rods."

"Ho! ho!" cried the young man again. "Old Sol and the boys!"

Annette wondered why he said "Ho! ho!" so very often. Certainly it was like someone in her book of fairy tales, but instead of the prince it was the wicked magician. He did not seem like a magician, and certainly not a wicked one.

Annette eyed him, naïve curiosity in her gaze. She liked the way his hair waved across his forehead and the merry laugh in his eyes. She was not quite sure about his smile, but his teeth were certainly even and white.

"I suppose that is why he s——," she stopped all at once and blushed.

"What?" he said, as though busy thinking of something else.

"Nothing," answered the little girl shyly, glad that she had escaped making so rude a remark.

"Here she is," cried the young man suddenly, a new expression coming into his face.

"Who?" asked Annette, glancing up quickly. "Why, its only Agnes," sudden delight in her eyes, but quite at a loss as to why this young man wanted her sister. She belonged solely to Annette. The young man was standing now, his hat off, a smile on his face.

"Only—," Annette heard him say in a low voice as he went to meet Agnes.

"Poor Agnes," thought Annette. "How hot she is! She has been working very hard. She must rest after lunch, or she will be too tired to dance to-night."

But, as Agnes and the young man met, the little girl saw that the hot colour died from her sister's face, leaving it pale, almost colourless.

"They told me—," Agnes began hurriedly, then stopped.

"Yes, they told me, too," laughed the young man.

"That Mrs. Marchmont wished me to come and choose some ferns from the fernery," said Agnes, the colour flitting back into her face.

"They told me," said her companion, "that you were down here picking plums."

"Did they?" said Agnes, in consternation. "Why, the plums are all picked."

"I don't doubt it," said the young man, his eyes on the girl's fair face. They were walking slowly towards Annette, both suddenly very silent.

"I have just had the extreme pleasure of introducing myself to Miss Annette Wiseman and Miss Muriel Wiseman," observed the young man politely, as they paused near the ladies in question.

"Have you?" said Agnes, sweet laughter edging her lips. "They are two darlings, aren't they?" with a sunny smile at her small sister.

"I recognize their value straight away," he answered, smiling also.

"I don't like him," thought Annette, and wondered why.

"Well—er—shall we pick more plums, or

shall we go to the fernery?" asked the young man pensively.

"I am not sure," said Agnes, hastily, half turning towards the house. "We are both here under false pretences. Perhaps I had better return."

"Return!" disappointment in his voice. "No, Agnes, not yet; let's grasp this opportunity, free from curious eyes."

"Mr. Forbes!" Agnes' voice was just a trifle severe and distant.

"Miss Wiseman!" he answered, swift contrition in his tone and attitude. Agnes hesitated, uncertainty in the poise of her slender body. "I think, perhaps, if we do go on to the fernery—" she began slowly.

"Yes, yes," the young man's voice was jubilant.

"You may carry some of those big hanging pots of fern back to the house for me," said Agnes, quietly mischievous.

His face fell. "Nothing else?" he queried.

"What else is there to carry back?" asked the girl, wilfully dense.

"If you will but answer the question I asked you a few months ago, I shall have much to carry back in my heart," he answered, ardent eyes on her flushing cheek.

"Hush," murmured Agnes, moving on, her eyes on Annette's wondering face. Mr. Forbes walked by Agnes' side.

Agnes glanced back. "Will you be happy there, dear?" she asked.

The little girl nodded. She realized for the first time that her sister had other interests in the world besides her own small self, and the realization hurt. As they went she hugged her dolly to her, whispering in a small tense voice, "I hate him, dolly; I hate him."

The pine needles were thick upon the path as Agnes and her escort walked beneath the towering trees. A tiny breeze moved the upper branches, and the whisper of the birds came faintly earthward.

"Would you care much if I gave you a heavy burden to carry back in your heart?" Agnes asked.

For a moment Bertram Forbes searched her face silently. "I do not think you are cruel," he said at last.

"Sometimes I have been," said Agnes. "Once I killed a bee." His merry laugh disturbed the birds and set them chattering noisily.

"Killed a bee!" he said. "Is that all, Agnes, my Agnes?" tenderness in his voice and the swift step nearer her.

Agnes flushed. "Yes," she said, "I did. I have killed other things, too, deliberately."

"Never a heart," said the young man gently. "You would not toy with that, Agnes?"

The girl turned her face from him, and the slow rose stole to her cheeks and back to the tiny ear nestling under the soft fair hair. Before them the plum trees stood, green and cool, and a little to the right was the fernery, almost hidden beneath its wilderness of vines. Somewhere beyond the plum trees a creek rippled over many stones.

"Sol and the boys are fishing down there," murmured Agnes, pretending to listen to the water's laugh, yet so sharply conscious of his presence.

He came closer to her. "They cannot know we are here," he said quietly, restraining himself, for her very nearness made his pulse beat more quickly.

"Someone may come from the house at any moment," she murmured a little nervously as she edged nearer the fernery.

"Not for a while," he answered. "Agnes!"

Her name on his lips thrilled her. Yet she kept her face turned from him. The door of the fernery clicked beneath her trembling

fingers. "Which ferns shall we take?" she asked, forcing careless speech.

"What do we care?" he whispered, coming boldly to her, and turning her face to his own. "Agnes, look at me?"

"I will not," she answered unevenly. "Mr. Forbes,—Bertram—let me go."

With a quick low laugh of happiness Bertram Forbes drew her closer to him, until the fair head rested on his shoulder. "I will not let you go, Agnes," he whispered fiercely. "You belong to me alone. Let me see your eyes, dear one. How did you withstand me so long, for I willed you to love me."

Agnes grew very still. "You willed it?" she whispered, her face lifting slowly to his. "Bertram. are you a magician?"

"Dear heart," he murmured, laughing, "for your love I would be anything."

The wind moved the leaves of the plum trees gently. To Agnes each leaf seemed to be watching, whispering.

"You love me?" Bertram Forbes' question was close to her ear, thrilling her heart.

With a deep, sweet sigh the girl turned her face to his. "I do," she answered simply.

Listening to love's tenderness Agnes forgot her small sister sitting so patiently beneath the

pines. Annette, meanwhile, speculated deeply on the unwelcome appearance of "Mr. Ho, Ho." She remembered him now. He had come once to Bungay, her home, riding on a fine black horse. She remembered how she had secretly admired his legs encased in brand new leggings, and how she envied him his silver riding crop. Now she detested him! The intensity of her dislike brought hot tears to the brown eyes, and her small red lips quivered.

"Not crying, little girl?" said a kind voice suddenly and unexpectedly.

Annette bit her lips and glanced up through a mist of tears. Two grey eyes were gazing down at her, holding such a wealth of sympathy in their depths that the little girl's heart unconsciously warmed towards the grey haired gentleman who owned them.

"No," she answered bravely, and shook her sun-bonnet to further emphasise her denial.

"Well, I'm glad you're not," said the grey haired gentleman, "for—," and here he sat down beside her—, "I almost feared you were just going to." Annette remained silent under his eyes, only, in spite of her, two big tear-drops fell slowly and splashed on to the fair Muriel's lace frills. Fortunately Guy Antrobus did not seem

to notice them, and in her immense relief Annette gave one gulp and smothered her grief.

"I wonder if anyone has passed you, little girl," said Guy Antrobus presently, and he looked at her gravely.

Immediately Annette eyed him suspiciously. "Did you want my sister Agnes?" she asked coldly.

Guy Antrobus smiled all at once so sunnily that her distrust vanished. "Yes, I did. How did you guess now?"

Annette's smile wavered, vanished, reappeared shyly, to give way again to a sober expression of disapproval. "Because you won't see her," she said, and hesitated.

"Why not?" enquired the grey haired gentleman, as he shaded his eyes with one hand and stared down the path.

"'Mr. Ho, Ho' took her away,—and—and—I hate, hate him," said Annette quickly and a little breathlessly, fearing those tell-tale tears might again betray her.

Her companion was quite silent as he stood up again and gazed down the garden path with an absent far-a-way look in his grey eyes. "Mr. Ho, Ho?" he said enquiringly.

"He's only Mr. Forbes?" explained Annette. "He's always smiling to show his gold teeth."

She hated herself because she said it; but then she hated "Mr. Ho, Ho" worse.

"Indeed!" said Antrobus, and once more his eyes glowed with sympathy, so that Annette stood up, arranged Muriel's dress, and then shyly put her own hand into his. He held it warmly and even squeezed it gently.

"Shall we see if we can find the white peacock?" he asked, absently.

"Yes," said Annette quickly, for the moment forgetting her deep trouble.

"It's hiding under the rose bushes, and its so prickly there that I can't stroke its head. I saw it there. Come on!"

As they went they heard the chatter of gay voices from the drawing room, and saw the head of Mr. Marchmont appear for an instant above the window ledge. But at that moment Annette saw the white peacock emerge from its hiding place and begin slowly to unfurl its wonderful tail.

CHAPTER IV

The Vintage Ball

THE floor was polished; the piano stood open. On the table, near the piano, Tim's violin rested within its old black case. The lights in the lamps and the chandeliers were turned low, so that the corners of the drawing room were dark with shadows. Here and there a chair or a cushioned sofa stood forth in bolder relief than its fellows, awaiting silently the merry throng who would rest there awhile, carelessly.

Round the room the windows were flung high, showing the landscape without, mountains, near and far, standing like huge, dull sapphires, sharply outlined against a greenish sky; tall, silent trees in a mighty ring about the house and garden; stars peeping furtively between the branches as though anxious to see the very commencement of the night's frivolities. To the north the long, black vineyards; to the west, fields of ripening grain. Through one of the

doors opening from the hall a small white figure stole. Softly tap-tap across the slippery floor little feet came gingerly, half afraid to risk the long walk to the piano. They paused beside the table where Tim's violin rested, small fingers feeling gently in the dusky light.

Only for a moment, for the open piano was resistless. The chair was low, and Annette slipped easily upon the cushion. Just beside her stood the mantel, its mirror reflecting the vases standing along the marble ledge, the upper portion showing a glimpse of the outside world of trees and mountains and slyly winking stars. Almost immediately the whisper of music stole up and across the room. In the dim light Annette's short fingers moved over the keys. At first she was afraid of disturbing the visitors dressing upstairs. Spasmodic voices—staid, worried, flustered, or carelessly gay—floated out to the tree tops and were imprisoned there. But gradually Annette forgot everything in her music. Snatches of song, of old fashioned dances, of wild reels and jigs, were woven together in a sort of mesmeric cycle. The child was a born musician. Agnes had long taught her the little she had mastered, but Annette needed small teaching; music rippled from her brain to the slender finger tips unconsciously.

Benjamin, sliding noiselessly down the bannisters, hearing music, came stealthily along the hall and peeped in. At first he could not see, then dimly he discerned the small figure at the piano. "That girl!" His eyes could scarcely credit it.

Annette neither saw nor heard him. Her head was bent slightly forward, her fingers feeling the notes tenderly, carefully, for it was growing quite dark outside, and the lights from the lowered lamps shed but a feeble glow over the immense room. As Benjamin crept in and slid into a convenient chair, the strains of an old song stole round the room, lingering in the shadowed corners, circling to the high panelled ceiling, where they seemed to float for a time, then circle back, spiral fashion, to the lower portion of the room, and so wander out through the open windows into the silent night.

Intense passion for music dominated the boy. Like Annette it entranced him, lifted him from the normal to the abnormal, from the sordid to the sublime, that even the heart of a child discerns. Benjamin thought he had never heard such music. His father could play, but mostly marches and military strains, not the haunting, heart-breaking music that Annette evoked from the creamy notes.

His eyes were riveted on her small form silhouetted against the open window. Girls, after all, were of some use. Benjamin began to recognize that fact, and the knowledge gave him food for thought. Gay voices came floating down the hall. The boy slipped from the room as noiselessly as he had entered it. Annette ceased playing as a laughing bevy of girls came in. "Shall we turn the lights up?" asked some.

"What angel has been playing?" the query went round. "Was it Agnes Wiseman?"

Agnes's laugh rippled above the speaker. "Me?" she cried gaily. "I cannot play like that. It was Annette."

"Annette!" Surprised voices echoed the child's name.

"Do turn up the lights someone, please, and let us see the child prodigy. Is she destined for Germany?"

"I'm afraid not." Agnes's tone was a little wistful. Annette would not have many advantages she knew.

While they were talking amongst themselves the child slipped from her stool and stole out to the verandah. She had quite two hours before bed time. Should she watch the stars or the dancers? Annette, in her heart, preferred the stars, yet she must see Agnes, who would

surely look very beautiful with her new blue sash.

Mr. Marchmont entered the room. "Dear me, girls," he exclaimed, "beauty in the dark! Let me remedy the matter." The lights went up one by one under his quick fingers. "There," he cried. "Let me see you all. Agnes, my dear, what is your dress?"

"Just a tarlatan and a blue sash," laughed the girl, pirouetting coquettishly.

Her cheeks glowed, happiness sparkled in the blue eyes; it was to be a beautiful night for her—a night of nights. She glanced about her. Was any girl there as happy? How pretty they looked! Mavis White, small and shy as a dear white violet; Beatrice Merryfield, tall, dignified, with a calm self possession that was the secret envy of all her girl friends; Myrtle Parry, with the gleaming hair of red-gold—Agnes did not care for her much, but she certainly appeared very charming to-night in her dress of shimmering satin and filmy blue gauze. Her eyes rested on a host of others. Everyone had been hospitably invited to tea, and had then dressed for the dance at Tarawingee. Their cheery hostess bustled in. "Now then, girls, have you practised your steps? For I hear the men coming across from their quarters."

A subtle stir seemed to scatter the girls about the room. Violet Langley went to the piano and strummed a lively galop. Beatrice Merryfield posed before the mantel knowing full well that the glass behind reflected her beautiful head and shoulders. Little Mavis White, growing nervous, retired to a far corner and sat demurely on a sofa designed to hold two only.

Flushed, but suddenly very calm, Agnes waited quietly near her hostess. The sound of approaching footsteps echoed along the cemented pathway under the acacias. Myrtle Parry crossed the room with her host and glanced through one of the open windows. She caught someone's admiring eyes and drew back in feigned coyness.

They were at the door now—cheery, laughing faces, gay with fun and humour. The room swarmed with young people. Youth was out for a frolic. Sadness and care had buried their heads for the nonce.

"Where is Tim?" Mr. Marchmont could be heard calling the violinist for the night.

A hired musician slipped on to the green plush cushion, and ran his fingers lightly down the keyboard, then raised his head and waited for the advent of the indispensable Tim.

"Tim, Tim!" Mr. Marchmont was growing

anxious. Surely the vintage had not proved too much for the old sailor.

"'Ere 'e are." A voice rose above the babel without, and Tim was pushed roughly into the midst of couples arranging the various dances.

"Come on, Tim," cried Mr. Marchmont, catching him by the arm and escorting him almost affectionately to the corner where the piano stood.

Tim lifted the violin carefully, tried the strings, the musician beating each note on the piano separately and clearly. It had been tuned at least a dozen times that day, but Tim liked certainty.

"Commence." Mr. Marchmont's quick staccato gave the word. The musician broke into a rippling waltz, and Tim chimed to the beat with his violin. Slowly the various groups untangled. Each man sought his partner, and so in a stately measured rhythm the couples glided into the waltz.

Agnes thrilled as she moved down the vast room, her steps in perfect unison with those of Bertram Forbes. How tall he was, and how

dear! She dared not glance up, for she knew that her heart lay mirrored in her eyes. People named him flirt. She knew him for what he really was. He hid the depths of his nature from all but herself.

In the swinging maze many faces passed for a moment and were gone. Half-consciously she was aware of someone's eyes upon her. A face swam past. Agnes saw the gleam of red-gold hair, the shimmer of a blue gauze dress. Was it Myrtle Parry's eyes that had made her feel so strange? Someone had glanced at her with scorn and half-veiled dislike. Agnes shook herself mentally and promptly forgot the momentary illusion in the strains of the beautiful "Blue Danube."

"This is heaven," Bertram was murmuring in her ear.

"Is it?" she asked, her sweet lips not quite under control.

"I want to kiss you, Agnes, my Agnes." His voice was still murmuring audaciously, his breath stirring the fair hair curling on her forehead.

"Bertram!"

He laughed, low and musically, and unconsciously his arm tightened about her waist.

"So shy, Agnes?"

"You are so reckless," she murmured, as they passed from the brilliantly lighted room to the moon-lit verandah.

Annette, snugly crouched in a deep chair where she could watch the dancers and also study the stars if she so wished, hearing voices near her burrowed deeper into the chair, not wishing to be discovered. Then she recognized Agnes's sweet laugh and allowed herself the happiness of peeping over the side of the chair and admiring her sister in the fresh tarlatan and new blue sash.

"Mr. Ho, Ho?" was with her. Annette was not altogether pleased. Why did he say it so very often if he was not a magician or something similar? She fell into a childish reverie while watching them over the dark chair ledge, and hardly noticed that they had strolled to the other end of the verandah. As Tim's violin struck up again she saw in a vague dreamy fashion "Mr. Ho. Ho." reluctantly withdraw and leave Agnes with the grey haired gentleman.

"I guessed he would want to dance with her," thought Annette complacently. "They all like Agnes, she's so pretty, 'specially with a blue sash." Agnes and the grey haired gentleman had not seen her for they presently seated themselves quite near her and began to talk.

"You are very happy to-night, Miss Agnes?" asked Guy Antrobus quietly.

"Yes, I am happy, Mr. Antrobus," returned Agnes. "Why do you ask?"

Guy Antrobus did not answer for a time. In spite of herself Annette could not help waiting to hear what he should say.

"Happiness is a very wonderful thing, Miss Agnes!" he said at last. Annette sighed in her disappointment.

"It is," she heard her sister answer dreamily. "It is so wonderful—sometimes, it seems as though it must vanish."

"No, no," said her companion in a quick uneven voice. "Do not lose it Miss Agnes—else life becomes nothing."

It was Agnes's turn to grow silent, for she knew that Guy Antrobus had had a great sorrow in his own life. Long ago his year-old wife had died, leaving him ever since a lonely kindly-voiced man passionately fond of young people. Was it because he had been denied his own happiness and the prattle of childish lips?

Agnes's happy heart filled with sympathy for him, and all unconsciously tears glistened on her eyelashes. Happiness is so near to tears, though perhaps one may not guess it. Annette was growing restless in the long silence and she

was about to peep over the ledge of her chair when Agnes spoke.

"What a wonderful night it is, Mr. Antrobus. See the trees—how dark and mysterious they look, standing like silent old giants. What secrets they must know. Have they known happiness or do they whisper that it fades with the day?"

Annette snuggled deeper into the chair. Really she was having a most interesting evening. She wondered if everyone else was enjoying it as much as she was. Agnes was a sister to be proud of. But what would he say now?

"True happiness does not fade with the day," said Guy Antrobus, and then Annette fell asleep quite unknown to herself, for while she slept she seemed to be waiting an eternity to hear what Agnes would say. When she did wake she glanced boldly over her chair arm and found two empty chairs beside her, which, when you think that it was her first ball, was really very annoying. Frowning slightly, she twisted her slim body so that she could see through one of the open doors into the big ball-room.

Mr. Marchmont and an elderly lady were just about to dance a mazurka. The elderly lady held her voluminous black-fringed skirts high

with one hand—thereby revealing a pair of railway stockings, arched her instep in the good old way taught her many years before, and waited, gazing benignly over her spectacles at the musicians. Mr. Marchmont cleared his throat, changed step quickly, looked round the room, smiled and nodded to Tim.

Tim's nimble fingers ran over his violin, the piano came in on the beat, as the dancers stood poised on their toes and the others waited anxiously for them to begin. Under such a concentrated battery of eager eyes, naturally they made a false start. Mr. Marchmont declared it was his fault, the elderly lady vowed it was hers. Mrs. Marchmont advised both not to be nervous since they were the only two who said they could dance the mazurka. In her interest Annette sat bolt upright, her brown eyes bright with fun. "I b'lieve Agnes knows it," she whispered to herself as they began again. One, two, three! The elderly lady glided elegantly, the railway stockings seeming thoroughly to enjoy the pastime. Mr. Marchmont's grace was somewhat elephantine, but his face beamed with pride and exertion, while, watching him, his wife's glowed with love and immense admiration. There was very little that "Henry" could not do.

Just as the dancers were really getting into the step Mr. Marchmont tripped over an obstinate tack. which had flatly refused to come out, lurched forward and deposited the elderly lady heavily into a window seat. One of the curtains, of course, came down. Annette gave a faint little shriek of dismay, for the fallen curtain revealed her brother Hal and a small fair-haired girl dressed in white. The ball-room echoed with the merriment of Mrs. Marchmont and her guests. Mr. Marchmont began hastily to apologise to the elderly lady, who recovered her balance by a miracle, and in her turn began to apologise to the guests whom the curtain had previously screened. "Oh, dear," sighed Annette, "I know Agnes could have done it much better," and she sank back into her chair with a sigh of disappointment.

Once more the music commenced to steal through the room, and once again the indefatigable dancers began to keep time to its measure. There were polkas and galops, and a Washington Post that left everyone breathless. There was also a Circassian Circle and a slow dreamy schottische, which so stirred the heart of Arthur Wilsonholme—he was dancing it with Agnes—that he found himself improvising a proposal.

"Miss Agnes," he breathed. "You can't imagine the realms of bliss this schottische is transporting me to."

"Really, Arthur!" said Agnes, her voice a-tremble with laughter.

"I wonder——" murmured Arthur—and hesitated.

"Yes?" said Agnes dreamily, knowing full well that Bertram Forbes' eyes were on her every movement.

"If you could recip——"

Agnes suddenly felt her shoe pinch horribly and adroitly brought Arthur to a standstill near the door where Annette sat watching. The little girl immediately vanished from sight and presently heard Agnes and her companion join Mrs. Marchmont. A falling star distracted her attention just then and she turned her attentions heavenwards. "How beautiful," she whispered, gazing at the multitude still winking above the trees or blinking curiously over the summit of the mountains guarding the horizon. When her eyes sought the ballroom again Agnes was dancing with "Mr. Ho, Ho."

A sharp pinch on her black-stockinged leg made her jump. "Oh," she cried in affright, "what was that?"

A derisive laugh came from behind the head of the chair. "Cry Baby Bunting."

"I'm not crying." Annette's indignant voice swelled with righteous anger.

"Cowardy Custard!" Thomas grinned at her over the chair. "Cry Baby—"

He was not allowed to finish, for a small fierce fist struck him in the chest.

"Let her alone, I tell you."

Benjamin rose in Annette's estimation as a knight of high romance. He defended her. Hitherto she had felt some uncertainty as to her opinion of him; now it was altered into firm liking. As the scales balanced high in favour of Benjamin they sank correspondingly low towards Thomas. She immediately despised him unutterably.

"What d'yer mean?" gasped Thomas belligerently, his voice lowered to a safe pitch.

"Let her alone," repeated his brother, feeling more than righteous in a good cause. "Only cowards pinch girls."

"Huh!" sniffed Thomas sarcastically. "You said last time she was here you would pinch her yourself if she ever came again."

Annette's round eyes surveyed her champion. After all was he made of clay! Benjamin disdained to answer.

"Can you count the stars?" he asked Annette.

"Yes, a little," she answered. "I counted five hundred just now."

"Where?" queried Thomas, in the tone of Thomas the Doubter.

The little girl refused to answer him.

"Did you really?" Benjamin's voice was pleasantly insinuating.

"Yes, over that big tree," said Annette addressing her conversation entirely to her brave rescuer.

"Pooh," growled the unabashed offender. "I've just counted five million there."

"Five million?" Annette's voice was pitched to the key of highest incredulity. "You couldn't count five million in one night, I know you couldn't, so there."

"Hur, I can," said Thomas. "Girls couldn't, of course."

"They'll all be out in a minute," said Benjamin quickly. "Let's get away while we can. Come on," catching Annette by the hand and pulling her after him over the edge of the verandah.

The grass was damp with dew. It felt cold through the little girl's thin stockings as she fell upon it. She got up gingerly and rubbed her fingers together.

"Where are you going?" she asked uncertainly.

"Some of the pomegranates are turning quite red on one side," said Benjamin, preparing to lead the way towards a row of pomegranate trees. "Come along." Annette followed in his wake; Thomas treading slowly in her footsteps; a small silent trio bent on iniquity.

Annette felt certain Agnes would not like her to eat green pomegranates at night. Benjamin and Thomas knew what their mother's horror would be could she but see them.

Still they went. Stolen fruits are sweet with a strange sweetness. As they passed the entrance of the cellar the air was heavy with the odor of distilled grape-juice. It seemed to rise from the flags beneath their feet, to ooze from the crevices of the thick wooden doors, to permeate the night with its languorous enervating essence. In the kitchen the maids were laughing and chatting, an occasional masculine voice ringing in a deeper key. In the yard, under the box-trees, a group of men were gathered about a keg of wine, their voices raised somewhat immoderately, their gestures uncertain and often belligerent.

"Who says the Pope ain't infallible?" cried one boisterously.

"I do," the answer came promptly from a short, fair man, unmistakably Teutonic.

"Then you're a liar," flung back the first speaker.

"Let's hurry on," whispered Annette, frowning at the noisy group, and quivering unconsciously at the sound of ugly words.

Down the cemented path their footsteps echoed. Overhead the acacias watched and between their softly moving leaves the stars peeped furtively. Benjamin opened the wicket gate leading into the garden. Stealing past a wooden portion of the house they came to the pomegranate hedge stretching darkly irregular to the banks of the creek.

Annette glanced into one of the rooms as they passed the house. A lamp was burning dimly beside the mirror. It was the bedroom where she slept with Agnes. In a little while she must go to bed; meanwhile the pomegranates lured her.

Up in the brick portion of the house the strains of Tim's violin circled and eddied, the softer notes of the piano floating in unison. The faint sound of many dancing feet upon a polished floor stole down to the garden, with the subdued mirth of voice and laugh.

"Hist!" Benjamin had found his favourite

tree. "Here we are," he whispered. "Give me your hand." He seized the small brown hand uplifted and drew Annette to the fence, Thomas scrambling after her. Dark blotches, the young pomegranates swung around them, above, beneath. on a level. Benjamin's busy fingers were feeling, pinching, breaking.

"Here's one," he said, offering it to Annette.

She took it, wondering however she would eat it. Very soon all three were munching the gleaming, half-ripe seeds, so lustrous and glorious by moonlight.

The music died in the drawing-room, and the children heard the dancers move out to the verandah. For a while they kept still. The boys felt the eagle eye of their father must surely pierce the thick shadows of the hedge, should he chance to be on the verandah, and Annette's conscience began to prick her sorely. She felt sure the juice of the fruit had stained her frock. How should she avoid explanations with Agnes on the morrow? With a brisk chord the music awoke, and voices and footsteps deserted the verandah.

"When I'm grown up," quoth Thomas, "I intend to dance every night."

"You couldn't" said Annette.

"Yes. I could. Boys can do anything," scornfully.

"Sh—" breathed Benjamin. "Someone is coming."

The trio waited in suspense as two figures came slowly down the cemented path, through the gate, and past the hedge. Gleam of red-gold hair, shimmer of satin and blue gauze. two dainty shoes adorned with sparkling buckles.

"Miss Red-hair," whispered Thomas sarcastically.

"Sh!" said his brother angrily.

Annette watched their approach—the girl beautiful in the moonlight, the man so tall and debonair.

"Why it's 'Mr. Ho, Ho!'" she murmured under her breath.

Benjamin squeezed her hand, signalling silence.

A moment of fear while the two scanned the pomegranate trees, as though cognizant of what was hidden in their thick black shadows.

"Is the white peacock in there?" a girl's voice asked curiously.

"Yes, dear heart," a man's voice answered musically.

They passed on and the children moved.

"Did you hear?" asked Benjamin, "they're lovers I guess."

"They thought my dress was the white peacock," said Annette.

"Some day," said Thomas, "I shall say 'dear heart' to a girl."

"What girl?" Benjamin interrogated quickly.

Thomas cast his eyes on Annette's brown curls but did not answer, for the sound of returning footsteps caught his small sharp ears.

The girl was laughing this time. "Do you really love me as much as that?" she asked, in a voice sweet and clear as a flute.

"Ten thousand times more," her companion answered softly, his arm circling her slim waist. Her face was raised to his, the gleam of her red-gold hair like living fire, the shimmer of her gown a marvellous sea of azure. Swiftly the man bent and kissed her on the lips. "Dear heart," he whispered once more.

They had gone up the path to the verandah, and so to the gay throng circling unwearingly, before the children spoke.

"I must go to bed now," said Annette, reluctantly, moving to descend.

"I'm not going to bed all-night," said Thomas, making room for her.

A guilty trio presently moved towards the

house. In the moonlight Annette saw the dark stain on her dress, and her heart was heavy.

"Good night," she said, slipping into the room where the lamp burnt dimly.

"Good night," said Benjamin and Thomas carelessly, moving on.

Annette turned up the light and surveyed her frock, then dipped her handkerchief in the water-jug and tried to sponge the stain. It came out a little, and with a sigh she took the dress off and hung it over a chair, taking care to hang the stained part underneath.

Just before she fell asleep Agnes came in. To Annette, half unconscious, she seemed some white fairy floating noiselessly about the room. A kiss, light and fragrant, descended upon her forehead, the bedclothes were softly smoothed, the nets pulled down; then the light dwindled to a mere point of flame, and Annette was in darkness and dreamland.

In their room, in another portion of the house, two lithe figures scrambled into miniature bed-garments.

"When I grow up," said Thomas, "I'm going to marry a girl with red hair and brown eyes, and I'm going to call her 'Dear Heart,' so there."

"So'm I," said his brother calmly, slipping into bed.

CHAPTER V

Confidences

A SOUTH wind, charged with rain, blew fresh and cold upon the occupants of the double buggy moving at an easy pace over the rough track meandering through fenceless miles of forest. The day following the vintage ball had dawned cool and dull, and had therefore been welcomed by Agnes and Hal Wiseman for their long drive home. Annette, too, was glad. Last time, in spite of the sunbonnet, her poor little nose had been burned by the sun, and she did not wish a repetition.

Soon after lunch they had started. The track wound like a mighty reptile under giant trees, mahogany and ironbark, apple, blue-gum and stringy bark. It curved and twisted in multitudinous contortions up rocky precipitous rises, down deep misty gullies where tree-ferns fringed the sides, past the clearer sparsely-grassed patches where the bull-dog ants built their nests among tufts of reed grass.

Agnes spoke little during that first part of the

homeward drive. Her thoughts were lost in a sweet dreamy unreality. For once, the woodland so dear to her, passed unnoticed, offering its rare beauty of colour and voice to unseeing eyes, heedless ears. Her eyes, darkened with thought, held a new bright light; on her lips a riper sweetness dwelt.

Hal, too, seemed preoccupied. Agnes guessed where his thoughts dwelt. Little Mavis White had been too shy to escape from the seat designed to hold two only. Hal, in his turn, recognized the reason of his sister's vagrant dreams, and so both, wrapt in their own absorbing reflections, forgot that a small girl sat silent between them.

A flash, a rush of scarlet wings, and a parrot had passed. Annette leaned forward, thrusting the frill of her sun-bonnet back from her face.

"There he is," she said, pointing to a swaying sassafras.

"Where?" asked Agnes dreamily, turning her head.

The little girl pointed. "There, on that bush. Can't you see, Agnes?"

"Yes, yes," murmured Hal, absently flicking the horses with the length of soft plaited leather fastened firmly to a polished hickory stick.

With a spurt the horses bore them to the summit of the hill. Annette glanced back. How had they come over that awful road, notched with small brown boulders, some smooth, others jagged like sharp upraised teeth. On the top Hal rested the horses, their glossy, shining sides panting with exertion, their nostrils dilated with quickened respiration. Overhead, underneath, the forest murmured, vast, primeval, wonderful. Through the tree tops the laggard sun shone, a pale gold disc, his furtive glints setting strange forms dancing up and down the tree trunks like shy goblins playing at hide-and-seek. Around them mingled confusion of sweet melody echoed. The note of the coach bird sounded with the voice of the wild pigeon; above both came the melting ringing notes of a hidden bell-bird; nearer a dove lilted, its soft coo drowned by the merry chatter of a willy wagtail; far in the gully behind, the whisper of water trickling over stones and the singing of the wind in the she-oaks.

"Here he comes," said Annette suddenly.

"Who?" questioned Agnes, hurriedly turning her head to see.

"Arthur," answered the little girl, quite unconscious of her elder sister's sudden disappointment. "I saw his horse between the trees.

He'll catch up to us. He told me he would before we started."

Hal laughed softly and urged his horses forward. "Shall we try and race him?" he asked quizzically.

"No, no, Hal," said Agnes, smiling. "Poor Arthur would never forgive us."

"He'd soon catch us, anyhow," said Annette, wriggling in her seat so that she might see Arthur Wilsonholme more plainly. "Yes, there he is, just on the top of that long hill." She waved her hand frantically to the horseman following them, and was delighted to see him wave his straw hat in return.

As though the advent of another had broken some mysterious spell, Agnes and Hal began to speak.

"How well Mrs. Marchmont always manages." said Agnes.

"Yes, she does," answered Hal, lazily. "The music was splendid, wasn't it. Did you dance that schottische, Agnes?"

"The sixth?" asked his sister, reflectively. She had danced the sixth with Bertram Forbes. Hal nodded. "Yes, the sixth," he said, noticing all at once how particularly pretty Agnes looked.

"I had it with Mr. Forbes," she said slowly,

"but I'm afraid I did not notice the music in that one."

Hal laughed again. "Didn't you?" he said, adding "Jolly awkward for me when the curtain collapsed?"

It was Agnes's turn to laugh. "Wasn't it?" she answered. "I'm sure many a jealous masculine eye was turned your way, Hal."

"Think so?" said Hal in noncommittal tones which did not deceive his sister.

Behind them sounded the clatter of approaching hoof-beats. Agnes turned her head.

"Well, Arthur," she called.

"Thought I'd missed you," answered Arthur Wilsonholme breathlessly. "Had to wait a mile back to prise a stone from the mare's hoof. She seems a bit lame since."

"Really," said Agnes, smiling at the young fellow as he drew abreast with the buggy.

"Hullo, Arthur," said Annette, suddenly leaning forward.

"Well Annette, how's the nose?" he asked.

"Not burned a bit, Arthur," answered the little girl, laughing with him.

Agnes peeped under the frill of the sunbonnet. "Neither it is," she agreed. "How fortunate we should have a cool day."

"What did you think of the dance?" questioned

Arthur. "I think its the best I've ever been at." He gazed at Agnes so eagerly as he spoke that she turned her head only to find Hal's teasing eyes upon her.

"Think so, Arthur?" said Hal, cheerily. "I do, too. Good music, beautiful supper, enchanting girls, plenty of fun."

"Ra—ther—." assented Arthur heartily. "Awfully jolly affair. Wish there was another to-night, don't you?"

"I wouldn't mind at all," replied Hal, putting on the brake as they began a steep descent.

Arthur Wilsonholme accompanied them for the rest of the way home, sometimes falling behind, anon jogging forward, oftener keeping close to the buggy which bore so fair a freight. As the afternoon waned and the miles sped silently under the hoof-beats of "Swagman" and "Cobby," the black horses, the wan sun hid behind a muffler of grey cloud. The wind, leashed for a time, broke loose, rushing up from the rear with an impatient sigh, rattling the dead leaves on the ground, shaking the living ones above. And in its wake crept a misty trail of rain, like fine dew, clinging to Agnes's raincoat in wreaths of pearls, damping Annette's sun-bonnet so that it drooped tantalizingly over her eyes.

It ran along the hills like a ghost, shrouding the lower trees completely, showing those higher in dim, formless blurs. Birds had winged their way to leafy shelter, and, save for an occasional frightened hare shooting like lightning across their path, they moved through a deserted world.

Dusk fell as they reached the crest of the hill overlooking the small town of Wilton. Lights twinkled here and there through the thick mist. Rumble of hidden vehicles and the baying of one or two disconsolate dogs seemed the only sound of life.

"Nearly home," said Agnes, bending to peep beneath the limp sun-bonnet. But the little girl's eyes were closed, and through the small red lips her breath came in soft regular gusts.

"Asleep?" queried Hal, meeting his sister's eye.

She nodded, and, doing so, the clear pale raindrops ringing her hat fell, a shower of pearls, into her lap.

They drove down the main street, between rows of shivering poplars bordering each side, their slender forms like sentinels in the fading light. The brilliant glow of a blacksmith's forge flashed for a moment as they passed; a

church bell rang out in the misty air, muffled like a hidden flute.

"Choir practice?" said Hal.

"Yes," answered Agnes, propping Annette's weary head against her shoulder.

At a narrow bridge spanning a creek Arthur left them, the double buggy went on alone between fences, grey, spectral uncanny sharp fingers pointing from the earth; over a larger bridge, the river, silent, muddy, far below; and so out again into a country road, stretching wet and muddy before them, until the small village seemed to vanish behind them like a dream.

Baying of many dogs welcomed their arrival.

"Down, down, Towser! Down, Gyp!"

Annette awoke to the sound of Hal's voice ordering the dark battalion off. Agnes jumped out and lifted her down.

"I'll bring everything in," said Hal, driving on to the stable.

"Back again?" a stentorian voice bellowed from the house. "Where's my little girl. Is she with you?"

"Yes, father," Annette answered sleepily. She ran on in front of Agnes, and mounting the steps first, greeted the white bearded figure standing at the top.

"Where's mother?" she asked, fast waking

and anxious to tell her adventures. Without waiting for an answer she ran into the room lit with softly spluttering candles.

"Hullo," said someone loudly, "won't you give brother Gilbert a kiss?"

"I will after," said Annette impatiently. "Where's mother?"

"In her room, Miss Impatience."

Annette opened a door. "Mother!" she called, "Mother!" With a happy sigh she nestled close against the slender delicate figure seated in a deep cushioned chair before a log fire. "My little girl," murmured the lady. "My little, little bairn. Is she glad to be home again?"

Agnes found them there whispering in the firelight. With a sigh, weary, half tremulous with suppressed emotion she seated herself beside them, leaning forward and kissing the coils of soft dark hair crowning her mother's head. A thin transparent hand drew her closer.

"You have had a nice time, Agnes?"

"Beautiful, mother!"

Something in the girl's voice, a tense undercurrent, a subtle change of tone, like the sound of a stringed instrument which we have not heard for days, made her mother turn quickly towards her. A shadow of sadness flitted

across the delicate features, tinted to the colour of a pale pink blossom in the ruddy light of the fire. But she said nothing.

"Annette is very sleepy, I think."

Agnes's voice was lower, more controlled as she folded her own hand about her mother's, lying, like a white anemone, across the little girl's dark hair. "You have been lonely?" she said. "We will have a long talk afterwards."

"Yes, dear," answered her mother, her eyes, blue as her daughter's, fixed steadfastly on the blazing fire.

Hal came in, followed by his father.

"Light up, Hal," cried Lewis Wiseman, testily. "We're not all blind yet, I hope. Let me see how you look."

A spasm of pain crossed his wife's face, and an expression of unutterable patience settled on it She did not turn her head, but sat listening to the conversation around her.

Hal kissed her affectionately. "Little mother," he whispered low in her ear, then crossed the room and lit the candles standing in their brass candlesticks on the round table of polished cedar. Beside the candlesticks a huge Bible rested; near it was a ball of white wool, the long steel knitting needles thrust carelessly through it protruding at either end in

glints of silver. From the other room came the sound of a table being set and a meal prepared quickly for the travellers, and presently into the desultory fire of question and answer between Hal and his father, old Katrin's cracked voice found its way.

"Tea's ready for them as wants it." Her grey hair and gleaming eyes peeped round the corner of the door. "Where's my darlint?" she asked unceremoniously.

"Here she is, Katrin," answered her mistress. "But she is going to let mother put her to bed to-night."

"Oh, verra weel, verra weel," muttered Katrin disappointedly, withdrawing her head from the doorway.

After tea, when Annette was snugly in bed, Agnes and her mother sat before the fire, both thoughtful and rather silent; the mother waiting for the confidence she knew would come, Agnes hesitant, her secret on her lips, the happiness of it brightening her eyes to the brilliance of jewels. In the other room Gilbert practised on a violin, and Hal was singing to himself in a strange minor key, as he absently watched his father read the paper, the candles beside him dripping grease upon the uncovered table. One candle remained in the room where Agnes and

her mother sat. Its dim light drew shadows high upon the walls, where one or two pictures hung, solitary oblongs against the dead cold white of their background. Silent, the small frail woman waited, listening for the first parting of her daughter's lips, for the indrawing of her quick breath.

Suddenly Agnes knelt at her mother's feet, drawing her face to hers with young strong hands. "Mother?" she whispered.

The mother did not answer, only clasped her arms about the slender waist and pressed her lips upon her daughter's hot forehead. "Who is it?" she whispered back, her eyes, lustrous, beautiful, unseeing, striving to pierce the black wall for ever surrounding her.

"Bertram Forbes."

"Bertram Forbes?" echoed her mother. "That light-hearted dangerous flirt, who has been in love with every girl in the country, Agnes!"

"Don't mother!" Agnes's voice was pained as she pressed her fingers to her mother's lips. "He has two sides—one for the world, one for me. Ah! do not doubt him, mother, for I love him and he loves me. Do you think I cannot tell the real from the false?" The girl's voice faltered, but it was very sweet and filled with a

ringing belief in the truth and purity of the man to whom she had given her love.

"My child," said her mother wistfully. "I only pray that you may find happiness. I do but go by what I hear. I cannot see. You can, and I think no man, however false his nature, could be so before your clear eyes of truth."

"He is not false," said Agnes dreamily. "I know it mother. I have looked into his eyes, and seen the truth mirrored in them. Believe me, I have not lightly given myself. I have waited, hesitated, a long time."

Her voice trailed to silence, and in the glow of firelight and candlelight the two clung together.

The violin sang unevenly, its strings a little out of tune, for Gilbert was a plodding, if not very satisfactory amateur. The rustle of papers and a chair leg scraped the floor noisily. "Play something, can't you?" the loud voice of Lewis Wiseman broke in on the violin's halting notes. It ceased suddenly, then lilted to the strains of "Bonnie Dundee." "That's better," growled the voice.

Agnes's face had grown hard, the softness smothered in her eyes, as she rose to her feet. "How sweet it sounds to-night, Gilbert?" she called, raising her voice a little.

Gilbert came in, still playing. "Think so," he asked carelessly, glad of her praise. The old violin was very dear to him.

Afterwards when darkness curtained the house and the lights had gone out one by one, Agnes threw open her window, and, resting her elbows on the sill, gazed into the night. The mist had rolled away, and the pallid outlines of a moon shone wanly behind thin clouds, high and still. Nearer the earth those, dark with rain, fled towards the north. An oppressive silence held the night. Not a curlew called, not a tree stirred. Yet, in the girl's eyes, lifted to the heavens, a great light shone, and her lips moved, as though in prayer. Glimmering like moving grey satin, the waters of a lagoon gleamed at the foot of the hill. Around it stood the white trunks of ti-trees, their black close foliage throwing deep shadows upon the water.

In her bed, Annette moved restlessly, sat up, and in sleepy tones called, "Agnes! Agnes! Why did he say—why did he s-a-ay ——" her voice dwindled to a mere murmur.

"Go to sleep, dear," said Agnes, softly.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she unpinned the heavy masses of her golden hair.

CHAPTER VI

A Visit to Bungay

WHEN Mrs. Marchmont ventured abroad there were preparations many and varied. The large tin trunk from the attic must be brought out, well dusted and well aired. Benjamin and Thomas were generally given the honour, and their energy and delight were boundless. It was bumped out reckless of dints, and trundled by different methods to their mother's room. Sometimes they pretended it was Her Majesty's coach, and they, the horses; at times Thomas shoved from the rear, making believe that the coach was bogged to the axle in heavy mud. Occasionally Tom popped in, but was promptly tipped out by his brother, and punched for his impertinence. Again, it was a chest filled with buried treasure which they had rescued from pirates bold; anon, it was wreckage cast up by the sea. By degrees it reached their mother's room.

Mrs. Marchmont had promised Agnes a visit to Bungay. The excitement of the vintage had

barely subsided when the boys were ordered to bring the trunk from the attic. After some wild adventures on perilous landing places and in dark spider-haunted corners, it was dragged at last into their mother's bedroom. Mrs. Marchmont was stooping over the lower drawer in her cedar chest, sorting clothes.

"Don't forget my blue necktie," said Benjamin.

"And my red spotted handkerchief," added Thomas.

Both had been presents from their idol, Sol. and were kept for high days and holidays.

"I want you to put some camphor in the bottom of the trunk," answered their mother, as she continued to sort shirts, collars and socks. The boys made a dive for a small pine cupboard in a far corner of the room.

"I was here first," growled Benjamin, clutching the knob of the drawer in which the camphor was kept.

"I tell you, I was," muttered Thomas, obstinately clutching the other knob.

A wordy battle ensued, and the knobs received sundry vicious wrenches, while the cupboard tipped forward as though in trepidation at their contemplated onslaught. Neither saw nor heard their father, who appeared suddenly at the door.

"Louisa," Mr. Marchmont's voice was anxious, and he eyed the grey hat which he carried in some uncertainty. Then he saw the boys. "Boys." His anxiety changed to quick wrath.

They did not answer, for the drawer jerked open unexpectedly, and both combatants sprawled upon the carpet.

"They are so excited," said Mrs. Marchmont soothingly.

"Excited!" Benjamin recognized something in his father's tone that boded punishment.

"Here's the camphor," he cried, plunging head first into the drawer and bringing out a small square tin which he handed to his mother.

"I wanted—to get it—," bawled Thomas, with a shriek of angry annoyance. "I was—here—first. I should have—"

"Hold your tongue," said his father shortly.

"Henry!" Mrs. Marchmont's voice was gently admonitory.

"Excuse me, Louisa," answered her husband, "but Thomas exasperates me."

"Run down stairs and find me some moth balls," said Mrs. Marchmont, well versed in the art of managing her men folk. The boys made a wild dive for the stairs, disappearing like streaks of lightning.

Mr. Marchmont approached his wife. "Shall

I wear this?" he asked, turning the grey hat around in a contemplative manner.

His wife eyed it dubiously. "Black suits you better," she answered tentatively.

"It does," agreed Mr. Marchmont promptly. "I was foolish to buy this hat. I shall give it to Tim."

"Don't be stupid, Henry," answered Mrs. Marchmont. "I can't imagine Tim rounding up cattle in that hat. It is a very nice hat, but for visiting, your black is better."

"Your judgment will always guide me, Louisa," returned Mr. Marchmont, turning away with his grey hat tucked under one arm. He met the boys returning with the moth balls. They were climbing the stairs, two steps at a time, and nearly collided with their father. Thomas saved himself by dodging between his legs, almost upsetting him. Benjamin slid past like an eel, and both raced to their mother's room, heedless of their father's impatient reprimands flung after them with an unexpected generosity.

The packing over, Mrs. Marchmont filled a case for Agnes. To the boys this was even better than the mysteries of the great tin trunk, and they assisted with a right good will in the packing of the huge iced cake and bottles of their mother's preserves and pickles.

"Agnes always brings me something nice," murmured Mrs. Marchmont, as she carefully wrapped soft paper about them all.

"Will they have fruit in their orchard?" enquired Thomas, with some anxiety.

"Yes, yes," answered his mother absently.

"And a vineyard," asked Benjamin.

Mrs. Marchmont shook her head, but Benjamin forgot to feel any disappointment for Sol appeared just then around the corner of the verandah and beckoned to him. He rushed away, followed by Thomas, leaving their mother still engrossed in her packing. She was interrupted by Mr. Marchmont, who came down the hall carrying a small vase.

"I should very much like to take this over to Miss Agnes, Louisa," he said, pausing beside the case.

"It is so fragile, Henry," she remonstrated, eyeing it with some interest. Her husband had a generous habit of giving away her household goods that sometimes disconcerted her.

"It is indeed, but Agnes is a favourite of mine and I should like her to have this," returned Mr. Marchmont. "Is there no room in that case?"

"Just a corner. Yes. It can go here," replied his wife with equal generosity. The vase was a pet of hers, but then poor Agnes had

few pleasures in life. She would not grudge it to her. Mr. Marchmont left her carefully packing it beside the cake.

They were to start on their long drive next day. The intervening hours were filled with innumerable duties to Mrs. Marchmont, with boisterous rollicking on the side of the boys whose spirits ran higher with each passing hour.

When at last they were fairly launched on the trip, the boys leaned over the back of the carriage and waved their handkerchiefs to Sol and Tim, who stood watching them disappear up the long paddock. Tarawingee was left in Sol's charge, and he waved a brisk farewell in company with the rest of the servants. And not until the carriage had disappeared behind a screen of trees would he allow them to depart.

As the carriage bowled along, drawn by its fine, high stepping chestnuts, the boys began to remember all they had forgotten.

"I want to go back for my knife," growled Benjamin.

"And I forgot to bring my new pair of boot-laces," said Thomas tearfully. "These are nearly worn out and I won't have anything to lace my boots." He held up his boots for inspection as he spoke.

"Put your feet down," ordered his father

irritably. The chestnuts needed careful handling at times.

"We can easily buy another pair in Wilton," said his mother.

It was a long tiring day, and before they were half way to Bungay, the boys were asleep in the bottom of the carriage. Mr. Marchmont's nose was severely burnt by the sun, and Mrs. Marchmont's bonnet had slipped over one ear, giving her rather a rakish appearance. At mid-day they halted and picnicked by the way. Not many miles remained. Before sunset they would reach Bungay. Benjamin began to think of Annette, and Thomas dreamed of the orchard. Would they have apple trees in it or only oranges? Perhaps he might find a peach tree? Just then they came to a water hole, and Mr. Marchmont pulled up in order to let the chestnuts drink.

"Be careful, Henry," advised Mrs. Marchmont, as the carriage jolted after the chestnuts.

"It is quite shallow, Louisa. How hot the horses are," he returned.

"They're sweating," said Benjamin.

The horses stepped into the water and stooped to drink. It was a pleasant place, cool and shady with wild apples fringing the pool. Thomas found a bird's nest in an overhanging bough, and while he showed it to Benjamin and

his mother, the chestnuts waded deeper into the water.

Mr. Marchmont's hand was slack on the reins, his thoughts had flown back to Tarawingee. Would Sol remember to have the large wine keg cleaned out? Would Tim forget those steers in the house paddock? The chestnuts thought only of quenching their thirst. The waterhole was deeper than Mr. Marchmont thought. They stepped forward, inch by inch, when the carriage suddenly rose over a submerged log, swayed, dipped again, and sent Benjamin and Thomas slipping into the water. "Henry." Mrs. Marchmont's voice held fear and alarm, and she grabbed vainly at Benjamin's boots. It was too late. They were already in the water, which had become muddy with the chestnuts continued pawing.

"God bless my soul." Mr. Marchmont was recalled to the present with a shock, and he tugged at the reins.

With some difficulty Mrs. Marchmont succeeded in rescuing her sons, who, covered in mud, and dripping with weeds and moisture, spluttered in surprise and anger.

"Think—think you can drive?" Benjamin's question held contempt.

"I felt a frog," whimpered Thomas. "It touched my hand."

"Dear me, Louisa, what a misfortune." Mr. Marchmont whipped up the chestnuts, anxious to avoid his wife's remonstrances.

The horses plunged at the unexpected touch on the reins and then drew the carriage in a series of jerks to the opposite side of the water-hole. The annoyance of Benjamin and Thomas was past speech, and their wet clothes were taken off in a sulky silence.

"What are we going to wear now?" Thomas propounded a question which was troubling his mother exceedingly.

"These are the only suits they have brought, Henry," she said in some perplexity. "Whatever shall we do?"

"Haven't they any sleeping garments, Louisa?" enquired Mr. Marchmont, in some slight asperity. The misadventure was certainly annoying.

"Pyjamas in the day?" growled Benjamin.

"It is all we can do," said his mother.

"I won't wear them in the day, I tell you," stormed her son. Thomas was beginning to shiver.

"We had better go back, Henry," said Mrs. Marchmont. This decided Benjamin, and the pyjamas were donned in a dignified manner that scorned appearances.

They reached Bungay within the hour. The

boys stared gloomily from the shelter of their rug. Was Annette on the high stone verandah? Must she see them arriving thus? For the moment both hated their father for bringing them to such a pass. Benjamin tried to calculate the number of years it would be before he would take the reins.

From Bungay verandah Annette searched vainly for the boys. But the rug hid them, and her eyes began to fill with tears. She had looked forward so to their visit and had made fig jam in medicine bottles to entertain them; also lemon syrup after a recipe of her own.

"They're not there, Agnes," she murmured, clutching her sister's skirt.

"Yes, dear, I think they are," said Agnes kindly. "I believe I can see them sitting in the bottom of the carriage."

Annette's eyes brightened and when finally the boys stepped out, still sharing the rug, her delight was contagious, and so warm was her own and Agnes's welcome that the boys forgot to feel conscious of their foolish appearance.

There followed a delightful three days. Bungay grew gay with children's laughter. Each day was filled with something new. Hal took them riding on the sledge that bumped perilously down the hill to the river. Here they fished and swam, and caught crickets and grass-

hoppers on the steep banks. On their return to the house they generally found Mrs. Marchmont and Agnes in deep conclave over some interesting gossip of the countryside. Once, they discovered a shy-eyed girl seated beside Mrs. Wiseman, and for the rest of that day it was impossible to entice Hal to join in any of their marvellous enterprises.

"I hate Miss White," muttered Benjamin, as they retreated before the silent hypnotism of her girlish charm.

But they soon forgot their disappointment in the exhilarating pleasure of descending through a trap door into the underground room where Lewis Wiseman worked at his various hobbies. Annette led the way, confident of her father's welcome.

The old gentleman was engrossed in contriving a new fish hook. He found the children's advent stimulating, and Benjamin's suggestions distinctly helpful. While they put their heads together over the fish-hook, Thomas and Annette explored the dark corners of the cellar. It was a delightful place, dusty, untidy and impregnated with various odors of questionable quality. A dim oil lamp lighted the place, and cast weird shadows upon the stone walls which were festooned with clinging cobwebs.

Thomas discovered an enormous spider, wide

spread upon the stones, and an exciting chase ensued. Benjamin was loath to leave the fish-hook, but he could not allow Thomas to outdo him in the eyes of Annette, and for a time Lewis Wiseman was deserted. The spider led them from corner to corner; once it hid behind a stone jar, again it raced frantically towards the ceiling, finally it escaped them by disappearing between the flooring boards of the room overhead. Benjamin returned to the fish-hook, leaving Thomas and Annette gloating over the stone jar which held a vast quantity of buttons, of all sizes and of all descriptions.

From the cellar they went to the attic, a little musty room set in the roof of the house and overlooking orchard and hills.

"There's a rat up here," Annette whispered, as they cast curious glances about the room.

The boy's eyes gleamed, and for a time they searched in high hope. An old disused violin and one of Lewis Wiseman's discarded hats beguiled them from a fruitless hunt. Thereafter they roamed the orchard as a company of strolling players until the agitated fluttering of a small bird warned them of the vicinity of a nest and, perhaps, some warm mottled eggs.

Hal rode with them to Wilton one day, and Benjamin saw the great sale yards, built of stout poles, where his father's cattle were sold.

Some day he would come across with Sol behind a mob of those lowing agate-eyed bullocks. Some day he would sit astride one of those high round posts. The prospect was thrilling, and his face glowed with the intensity of his desire.

The yards suggested only dust and dirt to Thomas, and he eyed them with a hint of boredom and wondered if the buggy following with Annette, Agnes and his mother was yet in Wilton.

They found the buggy and its old bay mare drawn up in front of a quaint little shop, kept by an equally quaint old lady. Agnes and Annette were inside shopping. Mrs. Marchmont held the reins and talked to the same shy-eyed girl who had captured Hal from them before.

Her charm was unimpaired, and the boys presently rode off leaving Hal gazing into two very bright blue eyes. As they rode up the street they looked back and saw that Hal and Mavis White had wheeled their horses and were riding slowly down the street.

"Hur," growled Benjamin in disgust.

It was annoying to lose their companion, and both felt that the flavour of the ride had been spoiled, more especially as Hal did not return to Bungay until late that night. But their chagrin was forgotten next day in excited anticipation of their homeward drive.

CHAPTER VII

The Killing of the White Dingo

IN June, Mr. Wentworth, tutor to Benjamin and Thomas Marchmont, went home for the holidays. A day or two of wild hilarity followed. The schoolroom stood empty and desolate, books lying unheeded on desk and floor, a cap of Benjamin's lying forgotten behind the door, a favourite knife of Thomas's waiting patiently on a seat for remembrance, which would surely come sooner or later. Mr. Wentworth, in his turn, cast Tarawingee from his mind, and put the thought of his late pupils safely away in some far pigeon-hole of his brain.

For a week the boys worried their parents, digging the garden in moments of spasmodic industry, and incidently casting many bulbs out as worthless vegetables. They went into the milking yards and pestered the men until they were ordered out with much severity by their father. They raided their mother's pantry, chased the fowls and frightened the turkeys from the home paddocks to pastures further afield. They fixed tins of water over the kitchen

door, so that when the maids went in or out they would be deluged with an unexpected shower. In short, they did everything that mischievous boys could think of. At the end of the week Mr. Marchmont said things had gone far enough. They were both to go with Sol and work for a week at an out-station in the mountains. Instead of subduing them, the edict sent the boys into wilder bursts of exhilaration. The rest of the day was spent in ransacking cupboards for old knapsacks, in packing and repacking shirts, trowsers, collars, socks, which, needless to say, had to be re-sorted by their mother.

The following morning with furtive tears and a stifled unspoken fear, she bade them farewell from the high stone verandah and watched Sol proudly lead the procession up the long paddock, past the tall tree blighted and seared in the last storm, to the great white gate at the top. They passed through with a wave of old felt hats and wild hurrahs beating faintly back.

After they had gone Tim went about his work sourly, and with ill humour in his eye. Why should he be left behind? Already he cast about in his mind for a reason which should call him mountain-wards; the gate left open, and cattle escaped, if none other offered.

Meanwhile the boys rode gaily with Sol, their

quips and jests making the old stockman roll in his saddle with laughter. Moisture dimmed his eye as they described the pranks played on a long suffering tutor; on Mary, the housemaid; and on their own parents.

On they rode, their ponies bearing them steadily and well, and gradually, as the day wore on, a dim sense of their own importance began to dawn upon their young minds. They were sent to work, not to play. There were calves to be branded and many other duties. Thomas must learn to bake a damper. He felt it imperative, as it would be an everlasting disgrace if he returned without having accomplished this feat. In Benjamin's lusty heart, the desire to kill a dingo was rampant. By hook or by crook he must do it. Tim had told him of an old gun in the corner of the hut, and had instructed him how to use it, with due regard to its infirmities, should a dingo come near.

Well was it that Mrs. Marchmont guessed not half of what her sons expected to do. She would have immediately ridden after them on her white mare and brought them back, doubtless, not without a severe battle with Sol and his expectant following.

On, on, the grey-green trees striding ever backward, the mountains rushing nearer and nearer, until they seemed to glower upon the

moving trio, as though resentful of their slow, persistent advance.

The morning's ardor cooled, and afternoon brought a weary droop to the young shoulders; the long ride, a cruel assuageless thirst. At mid-day they had boiled Sol's billy three times, and still their palates craved. They felt suddenly that their father was a taskmaster of the cruelest description.

It needed all Sol's encouraging remarks as to the journey making men of them to bring them, without spoken complaint, to the shanty built just under the brow of a lofty mountain. They almost fell from the sweating, foam-flecked ponies.

"Water, water, where is it?" cried Benjamin impetuously.

But Sol restrained the headlong rush to the ancient wine cask at the side of the hut.

"Wait," he said, so sternly, that the boys look askance. Was Sol suddenly transformed into a tyrant.

"Attend to your horses first," said Sol solemnly, unsaddling his own as he spoke. "Always remember that, my lads. The horse first, yourself after. It is the rule of the bush."

Silently the boys obeyed, unbuckling girths and buckles, though each felt that his tongue must shrivel and fall out during the process.

With a gentle whoop, Sol waved the horses farther down the mountain-side. Necks craned forward, and snuffing the clear crisp air with hungry nostrils, they trotted quietly towards the belt of wild apple trees, under which they knew gleamed the waters of a still deep pool. Tin pannikins in their hot dirty hands, the boys watched them bend long graceful necks and drink slow and deeply.

The sun had not yet risen when Sol woke next morning from his dreamless sleep. He turned on his side and scanned the two lithe forms lying near him. What lads they were! What fine men he hoped they would be! Old Sol's eyes were almost tender as he gazed. Sentiment however did not play too high a part in his rough life. Yawning, he rose silently, and stepped from the hut into the clear freshness of the morning. He was unharassed about the matter of dressing, for he had lain down in the garments worn all day. The boys, too, feeling the air more rarefied than in the valley, had followed his example with the fervent wish that it might always be done.

As Sol stood at the doorway of the hut some twenty or thirty magpies chorused his appearance in loud warblings of wonder, hopping nearer and nearer curiously, until they stood in a circle before him.

"Good morning," said Sol, as he deftly manipulated his thick cake of tobacco. At the sound of his voice the birds flew back a yard or so, and presently began to chatter volubly over the matter. Sol gazed past them at the bush track creeping down the mountain-side, lost here and there, reappearing and running faintly under arches of sassafras, geebung, and wattle, under bluegum and woolybutt.

Beneath the belt of wild apple the pool lay dead white, rimmed with frost, the tall grass fringing its edges standing stiff and straight, like long thin knitting needles. Near and far, tier on tier, the deep blue mountains, mighty sleepless giants, guarded the land, a beautiful wilderness, that for so long had been the home of the kangaroo and wallaroo, of the fierce wild cattle which roved in mobs along the ridges, of the brumbies which rushed up the grassy slopes to stand gazing proudly over this vast demesne which was all their own.

Now, if one had the courage to penetrate into those mountains fastnesses, here and there, they might find such a hut as stood behind Sol. A small slab shanty, the veritable prison of some lonely stockman, who practically gave life, ambition, and often reason to the guarding of his master's interests.

Along such rugged tracks how many brave

men have passed. Burke, Wills, Lawson, Wentworth—those intrepid explorers who forced the secrets of the bush from between its very teeth, careless of the danger, striving ever to conquer; those same savage teeth often closing upon such men for ever. Glorious, mysterious, wonderful, a land brilliant and passionate, cradled under a turquoise heaven, crooned to by a sapphire ocean, jealous ever of encroachment.

Such thoughts as these, however, did not trouble Sol. It was hard to say what lay behind his eyes, as, quietly smoking, he gazed over the landscape with a bushman's keen sense of the beautiful. The first sun rays were heralding the day-god's advance. Far to the pearl-tinted zenith they streamed, flaunting in tender rose and saffron. The mountain crests grew warm, and slowly and sedately, like shy sweet maidens, the white mists of the valley swung into a steady upward motion. With a whoop of delight the boys awoke and bounded to the door.

"Good morning, Sol," they shouted.

He turned and surveyed them, his squint showing plainly.

"Sleep well?" he queried.

Up shot the sun as though sent from some Gargantuan catapult. The boys edged further out, their bare toes curved inward with the cold.

Frost whitened the grass near and far, hung on the leaves of the trees, glistened on the pool, made the bare patch of earth in front of the hut slippery as glass.

"Gee-whiz," said Thomas. Then, valiantly, "rather chilly up here, Sol."

"Jest a little," answered Sol, winking.

"Didn't you light a fire?" asked Benjamin, disdaining to mention how absolutely frozen he felt.

Sol shook his head. "I thought you wornted to learn all that," he returned, moving his short pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other.

Benjamin stared. "But I can make a fire," he announced.

"Let me see yer," said Sol.

Busily the boys set to and built the fire within the hut, piling it high with brushwood, mountain oak, stringy bark and ironbark. Soon the blaze roared in a great red column through the hole in the roof. Sol came in and watched. a tiny pucker between his eyes.

"How's that for a fire?" asked Thomas, admiringly, standing well out of scorching range.

"Be-eautiful," murmured Sol. "It's like the fire the little pig made," he added reflectively.

"What pig?" queried Benjamin, anxiously, scenting sarcasm.

"The little feller as boiled the fox that fell

down his chimbley in to the kettle of water," answered Sol.

"Oh, that one!" said Benjamin, carelessly. "Yes. I s'pose it is pretty big, but then we're jolly cold, Sol. Come a little nearer, won't you?"

"No, thank you," said Sol, dubiously.

Soon the blaze dwindled, and they were able to rake the logs together and hang the kettle on the rusty hook just over the hottest part of the fire

"Who wants to make a damper for tea?" asked Sol.

"I do," cried Thomas, exultantly.

"Where's the flour, then, and the water?"

Thomas brought some flour, musty, yellow, and filled with weevils; then got the water.

"It's all the same when they're cooked," said Sol, eyeing the weevils. Then he instructed Thomas in the method of mixing a damper.

When the soft spongy mixture was formed into an irregular circle, they thrust it under the coals and thick grey ashes that were the result of Benjamin's fine blaze.

With eager eyes, the boys watched the damper bake, the slow upheaval here and there under the layer of ash, the gradual permeating smell of cooking flour. They breakfasted on the remnants of yesterday's provisions, with

copious draughts of strong black tea from Sol's billy can. Never did a meal taste better. When it was over Benjamin lilted into song:

"There was an old woman of eighty-two;
She gave a great kiss and away it flew;
It flew in the crack of a cobbler's door,
And smacked the cobbler flat on the jaw.

Up jumped the cobbler with a rusty gun;
He shot that kiss and away he run;
Through Germany, France and Spain,
That old woman's kiss will come again."

Behind him Thomas carefully prodded the new-made damper.

"That's a fine song," quoth Sol, leaning against the slab wall and fingering his pipe lovingly. A long sinuous move of his body and he drew Thomas from the fire. "That'll do," he said, "let the thing cook itself." Unabashed Thomas took up the refrain of Benjamin's song.

"Through Germany, France and Spain,
That old woman's kiss will come again."

Then, suddenly struck by a hitherto unasked question, "Sol, where's your old woman?"

Sol jumped in surprise, gazing hard into the

boy's inquiring eyes. "What makes you ask?" he queried.

"Have you got one?" Thomas persisted.

Sol shook his head in a deep ruminative manner. "I dunno," he answered evasively, standing up and thereby nearly knocking the roof off.

What a day it was—bringing in the calves and their young, frightened mothers! Such a bedlam of bleatings and mooings, baying of dogs and cracking of whips, capable of sending any boy into a frenzy of delight and wild excitement. Benjamin's pony took a flying leap across the great rock standing wide and high some hundred yards or so beneath the hut. In the rock was the deep imprint of a kangaroo's foot. In pre-historic days what a mighty bound the animal must have taken? That rock and imprint were an eternal source of question and unanswered groping in remote ages to Sol, the illiterate stockman. He felt there must surely be some 'bloke' who could explain the whole matter satisfactorily to him. He had asked, but, in their explanations, no one so far had met with Sol's firm and undivided belief. It was inconceivable to him that the rock should have once been in a molten state. No! In Sol's brain, visions of a weird, awful creature lurked —a creature long since vanished from earth, of

gigantic proportions, of stupendous weight. Many a time he had paused beside the rock, ejaculating fervently between tobaccoy expectorations, "Lor bless me, what could it 'a' been like!"

When the calves were branded and their small soft ears lacerated by Sol's sharp knife, Thomas, who was robbing a bird's nest built over the pool, accidently fell in, taking with him a good sized apple branch. Sol not being near at the time, he neglected to change his wringing garments, and by night the hut echoed with his hoarse, incessant coughing. Sol was alarmed. The boy had a tendency towards bronchial trouble, and was by no means strong. If morning found him no better, Sol would be in a dilemma.

Thomas did his best to stifle the cough, half strangling himself in the process. By dawn he was worse, with a high temperature and unnaturally brilliant eyes. What should Sol do? To take both boys back was the only solution he could arrive at. But Benjamin, imperious, masterful, refused point blank to go. Let Sol go with Thomas, while he waited behind in the hut until the stockman returned. Go home, he would not! Desperately Sol argued, bounced, commanded, cajoled, descending at last to half hearted pleading, for in his heart the man was

pleased. What a game kid it was! Afraid of nought, neither dingoes nor bushrangers, nor yet the more awful loneliness of the dread implacable bush. After all, he would not be gone long—a few hours at most—and even now some of the others might be on their way up to see how things were progressing.

By mid-day, Sol and Thomas were well on their homeward way, leaving Benjamin monarch of all he surveyed, old Dapper, Sol's pet dog, his sole attendant. As the day died down, grim fear began to assail Benjamin. The sun is responsible for a good deal of Dutch courage; with his setting it vanishes. Down the mountain side long shadows fell, inexpressibly gloomy, filled with unseen terrors to young eyes watching. Benjamin wondered for the hundredth time what foolhardiness had left him stranded here, in a slab hut, in the heart of the bush! For all his twelve wise years, he quaked with inward fear, clutching Dapper more and more affectionately about the neck, putting his head upon the old dog's back, murmuring, "We'll stand together, old boy, won't we?"

Pale, spectral, the moon rose. Benjamin and Dapper sat before the fire within the hut, shivering now and then as bleak winter air came in through the wide cracks of the walls.

Once or twice Dapper got up and prowled

from corner to corner, sniffing the air furtively, whining now and then in a curious manner. Through the small square aperture, which did duty for a window, Benjamin glanced ever and anon, wishing fervently that Sol's familiar form would appear round the bend of the now indistinguishable track. As he gazed at the black wall of forest, something slipped silently from the underbrush and stood high upon the indented rock. Benjamin shuddered nervously. Dapper growled. "Quiet, Dapper, quiet," whispered the boy, excitedly. "A dingo—and a white one," under his breath, feeling the hair lift slowly on his head. What an adventure! Could he shoot it and thereby win everlasting renown? His vivid brain took fire. Eagerly he glanced about for the old gun. Yes, there it was hidden in its corner behind the tins. Quick groping fingers closed firmly about it, lifting it gently, very quietly, from its resting place. Tim had told him it was loaded. He looked out again. For a moment he could not see. Some clouds had veiled the moon. Only the crackling of breaking bushes and the soft pit-pat, pit-pat of many feet reached his ears.

Impatiently the boy waited, Dapper leaping at his side wildly excited, but strangely silent, When the moon shone clear again, Benjamin saw a sight which he never forgot. One after

another dark moving blurs, dingoes, slid from the underbrush into the open moonlit space before the hut, and so passed, Indian file, in a swinging gait down the mountain-side. From the rock the great white dingo surveyed his passing comrades as a king or a general would overlook a regiment of soldiers. His ears were flat against his head as though snuffing an elusive scent.

Benjamin's fingers trembled as he gazed and his keen young eyes blurred with sharply suppressed trepidation. What if he should miss?

Click! His fingers were on the trigger. A flash of white smoke through the moonlight, a loud report, and the boy fell back a space with the recoil of the shot. A howl, weird, dreadful, filled the night, followed instantly by the rustling of bushes hurriedly brushed aside or trampled underfoot. When the smoke cleared, the white dingo lay stretched at the foot of the great rock.

Madly exultant, Benjamin rushed to the door, Dapper now barking frantically. As the rough catch lifted under the boy's fingers, all at once the forest awoke with an awful noise. Howling of many dingoes, echoed and re-echoed, smote the side of one mountain and glanced off against another; leaped from chasm to chasm, wound down the valleys in a hideous chorus. Far and near it rose, now singly, in a loud mournful wail;

anon, in unison, a very pandemonium of blood-curdling cries. As though answering the dingoes, the stone-plovers or curlews split the chill frosty air with their shrill "wee-ee-loc, wee-ee-loc, wee-loc, wee-loc, wee-loc." Their wings brushed overhead fanning the air audibly, so swift and low was their aerial passage.

Benjamin let the catch rattle noisily back into its rusty clasp. "Quiet, Dapper, quiet," he commanded, half in anger, half in fear, lest his prize should escape even yet. Were the dingoes cannibals? He tried to remember what Sol had told him about them. What if the others returned and ate the white king? The boy's eyes blazed in his uncertainty. He handled the gun tenderly. Perhaps another bullet lay snugly within its chambers. If they came he would try again. Through the window he scanned the mountain-side, endeavoring to pierce the heavy shadows of red-gum and wooly-butt. Nothing crept from their blackness, the white dingo lay still in the moonlight. Ages seemed to creep past as the boy continued to stare out, his eyes glued to that moveless shape. Impatiently Dapper whined beside him, emitting every now and then a short sharp bark, leaping to the window, then crouching upon the floor of the hut.

At length sleep, long held at bay, assailed

Benjamin; the gun slipped from his grip slowly, softly, and beside it the boy sank down until his head rested heavily upon the old dog's shoulder. Motionless the animal lay, his green eyes closing and opening in a fitful canine slumber. The moon set, and the shadow from the rock stretched out and overlapped the dead dog.

On a small cleared ridge across the deep valley beneath the hut a man on horseback suddenly emerged from blackness into light. An instant he sat there, his head held high like the wild dog's had been. while his keen eyes sought every open space, above, around, below, seeming to fathom each lurking shadow.

A brisk word, and a second horseman, followed by a third and a fourth came from the dark belt of trees, passed slowly, carelessly, along the moonlit space and so disappeared again into the immensity of the sleeping bush.

CHAPTER VIII

Agnes Receives a Proposal

ALL that winter Agnes Wiseman kept her own counsel, her mother alone sharing it. That little bird, however, that Youth so intensely yearns to see, flew about from one to another, dropping here and there a vague surmise, a positive suggestion; so that Agnes had hard work to parry thrust and counter-thrust adroitly delivered by various inquisitive and gossiping friends. Relations were even more dangerous. They considered it their right to hear; they demanded information, and went away ruffled when it was gravely and sweetly withheld.

Bertram Forbes came once, twice, three times to Bungay. Agnes forbade him come too often. A lover must ever obey his lady. Yet Bertram was reluctant in his obedience. For the first time in his life love enthralled him, cast its tiny meshes about his vagrant senses and held them with witch-like lure.

Hoary-headed winter, lagging in the valleys, presently fled precipitously, as a vision of rosy-

faced Spring peeped at him across the summits of the bare brown hills. Like a young girl, singing, skipping, smiling, she came, scattering buds and tendrils and fresh green leaves with a generous hand, laughing wickedly at the flight of a dour, sad-faced old man. She came and nestled in the heart of Agnes Wiseman, though, indeed all the winter I think she had slept there, dreaming and crooning her songs, waiting for the signal to leap forth and paint the valley vivid and glorious with colour.

Agnes woke one morning, the weight of many household cares on her mind. It was she who saw to everything, from the brushing of Annette's brown tangled curls to the ordering of each meal. She did the sewing, too—shirts for Gilbert and Hal, dresses for Annette, sheets and pillow slips for the house. As she came out, the noise of squealing pigs filled the air and mingled with the hungry bleating of calves that were frantically butting into the wire fence surrounding the house. It worried Agnes to see the great dents they punched with their hard impatient little heads; yet Gilbert would persist in feeding them just outside the gate. Down the hill, past the barn, Lewis Wiseman worked in his vegetable garden. His bright blue shirt showed plainly against the green of iron-wood and willow lining the banks of the narrow creek

skirting the side of the garden. As Agnes paused at the open door she saw him cease digging for a moment, glance complacently at the rows of peas and beans, then take his wide cabbage-tree hat off and wipe his forehead with a red turkey-twill handkerchief that Annette had laboriously hemmed for his last birthday.

Unknown to himself, Lewis Wiseman made quite a picturesque splash of colour against the intense green of foliage and herbage. The corners of the girl's mouth tilted a little, as she thought how her father would scorn the idea of himself adding to the beauty of the scenery. His vegetables might, but not he.

Annette came out, a long pink ribbon in her hand.

"Put it back, dear," said Agnes, kindly. "That is your best, you know."

"Can't I wear it just this morning?" asked Annette, ruefully. "I want to visit Mrs. Pritchard this morning, Agnes." There was deep persuasion in her voice.

"Then just for this morning you may," said her sister, the smile playing about her lips more openly.

"Thank you," said Annette, gratefully. "Somehow you always understand me, Agnes. Let me kiss your hair. It is so beautiful and golden; just a mass of spun silk."

"Little flatterer," laughed Agnes, tying the pink bow, then stooping to the piquant face upturned to hers. She watched Annette pick her short skirts up in imitation of herself preparatory to stepping carefully through the dewy grass. "Where are you off to, dear?" she called, when the pink bow was half way down the hill.

"Just to father."

"I'll ring the breakfast bell in half an hour."

Annette nodded violently, half to her father, who was watching her, half in answer to Agnes. She ran the rest of the way, the pink bow flaunting like a cockatoo's crest.

"Hullo, little woman," Lewis Wiseman's greeting was brisk and cheerful. The beans had grown quite half an inch in the night.

"Hullo," said Annette, carelessly, scrambling through a hole in the fence, her fingers and knees sinking deep into the chocolate earth.

"How are the beans, Dad?" she asked, rising and scanning the rows.

"Splendid! How much do you think they've grown since yesterday?"

"Two inches."

Her father laughed. "Come, come," he said, "half an inch, and that is a lot. Get the tape measure and see for yourself."

"I will presently. Do you want any worms

for fishing to-day?" Annette's busy eyes were on the upturned earth.

"You can look for some. I may go after breakfast."

Annette worked busily among the worms. There seemed to be an extra supply of fat ones this morning. Every now and then she gave a subdued shriek of delight as she drew forth a wriggling creature and placed it carefully in a treacle tin kept expressly for that purpose in the corner of the garden. Spade in hand, her father watched her, the rim of his cabbage-tree hat standing out from his face, a very esplanade for beetles, flies and spiders. At that moment, a big bronze beetle was rambling around it, intent on finding the end.

Annette glanced up, pushed a length of ribbon back with a grubby hand, and remarked breathlessly, "See, what a lot I've got. P'raps you will catch 'grandfather' to-day?"

This familiar appellation had been given to a large shy fish that roamed in the still pool where Lewis Wiseman loved to dangle a line. Every effort to land him had been thwarted, until it had become quite an exciting quest with Annette and her father. They were determined to catch him some day. So far success had not come, though hope loomed ever on the horizon. Annette sometimes dreamed she had caught him

and in her sleep she would struggle manfully to land him, until Agnes, sleeping beside her would throw both arms about her and whisper subconsciously. "Is it nightmare, dear. Those tarts, you know."

A bell ringing harshly from the house brought Annette and her father to a standstill. Her father waved his red handkerchief to Agnes, while his small daughter wiped dirty fingers across her black stockings. Then they both went up through the wet grass, past the barn and the trough where the pigs were scrambling one over another to get their breakfast of milk and pumpkins.

Agnes met them at the door. "Well," she said, wiping some flour from the tips of her fingers.

"I found forty worms this morning," cried Annette, jubilantly.

"Forty! Dear me! Are you going to tempt 'grandfather'?"

"Yes," nodded Annette, decisively. "I told the worms they had a mission in life."

"Did you?" laughed her mother from the table.

The meal was a quiet one. Agnes and her mother spoke in low voices about suitable muslins for Annette's summer frocks, the little girl listened ardently.

"Mother," she broke in at last. "I don't want another black and white sprig. Do let me have one with a blue flower on it."

"Blue," said Gilbert, across the table. "You can't wear blue; pink is your colour."

Annette's cheeks flushed. It was her greatest ambition to have a blue-sprigged dress like Agnes's. No one guessed how her child's heart yearned for it. Yet she always got a pink, or something equally detestable. She frowned over her porridge plate. "When I grow up I shall always wear blue," she said, shooting a fiery glance towards Gilbert, who teased her by pretending to imitate the small pouting lips.

"Perhaps we could lengthen her white again," said her mother, gently.

Agnes saw the crestfallen face and said hurriedly, "Annette and I shall go and see what Miss Hogue has in her shop. She may have something really nice this year." There was brisk hope in her voice as she smiled at her small sister. The child's face brightened and she glanced affectionately at the sister who understood her so perfectly.

A morning spent in the Bungay orchard was always pleasant, more especially when the fruit hung ripe and luscious among the branches; but it reached its zenith of perfection when the pear trees, standing in rows down the side of the hill,

were white with blossom; when the peach and the plums, the nectarines, and the apricot trees were gay with honeyed flower and shyly bursting leaves. Here Annette wended her footsteps after helping Agnes wash the breakfast dishes. Katrin was busy this morning. An unmistakeable smell of soapsuds proclaimed it washing-day; therefore in the wash-house Katrin reigned as queen.

As the child stepped daintily over the carpet of grass, she sang under her breath:—

> The orchard is ablaze with bloom
> Of nectarine, peach and pear tree;
> The spring has chased dull winter's gloom,
> And birdies sing in joyous glee.

Annette paused beneath her favourite apricot tree, pushed her sun-bonnet further back, and looking above her at the glory overhead, murmured: "I don't quite like that last line. Perhaps, 'And birds are singing, joyous, free,' would be better."

Through the white drift of blossom, bees were dawdling, their panniers filled with golden pollen. As they laboured they droned their appreciation of spring, the warm sunlight tinting their wings to rainbows.

Annette shook her head and the sun-bonnet fell back again.

"The spring has chased dull winter's gloom
Beyond the sullen, misty sea."

she murmured softly. "Yes, I like that better. I hope I don't forget it before I see Agnes." A tiny pucker flitted between her eyes and she pursed her small lips in the effort of retaining her composition in her busy brain.

Presently she came to the peach tree, its wide out-spreading branches radiant and rosy, a veritable heaven. Annette put one foot into a fork of the tree, and lifted herself up, then along the limbs she crawled right out to where they drooped over some figs. With a sigh of deep contentment she untied the strings of her sun-bonnet and let it slip to the ground.

"I'm so glad to find you at home to-day, Mrs. Pritchard," she said. "Yes, it has been very hot walking here, very hot indeed." Annette smiled at a great clump of blossoms near her and bowed her head, as though in answer to Mrs. Pritchard's reply. "Well, yes," she remarked, languidly, "as you say, this weather is very effervescing. My sister Agnes feels it very much. Is that the right word, I wonder?" she murmured, in a quick aside to the figs.

While Annette visited her imaginary Mrs. Pritchard, Agnes was deep in the culinary art. She must make scones to-day, for the bread box

was low, and perhaps she might find time, as Katrin said to "knock-up" a gingerbread for Gilbert and Hal. Poor boys! There they were ploughing the flat, toiling behind old Dobbin and Susan, two animals exasperating beyond measure when one wished the furrow to be straight. Down at the river, beside a still black pool, her father fished. The sun had not yet pierced the foliage around him, for the pool where 'grandfather' resided was at the bottom of a steep incline. Lewis Wiseman's place of vantage could only be reached by stepping carefully along a narrow path winding from the summit in corkscrew curves. Under native nutmeg and silver sassafras it ran, wild grape vines and vividly emerald passion vines growing in a tangle here and there across it, making the descent even more precarious. It was a silent spot; the trees stood high and straight, the earth beneath them strewn thickly with leaves, russet, orange, crimson, and sometimes a fresh bright green one.

Lewis Wiseman sat with his back to a willorouk, which towered above its fellow trees as a giant above pigmies. Thick at the base, it tapered gradually towards the heavens, disdaining to branch until its proud head looked over all surrounding it. In its wonderful headdress the foliage grew dense and beautiful.

Among the leaves hung the young fruit, pale green lobes, somewhat similar to the loquat, but in taste very different, being intensely stringent, like the tamarind of India. This tree, the only one of its kind in the brush, was highly prized by its owner. Visitors were taken to see and admire it, and woe betide anyone who even dug a thumbnail into the thick bark. It was a treasured possession well-nigh as dear to Lewis Wiseman as one of his children.

As usual 'grandfather' refused to be caught, and the ardent sportsman was beginning to feel drowsy, when the sound of footsteps coming down the path roused him. Glancing behind he saw a young man approaching, swinging a thin cane.

"Good morning, Mr. Wiseman."

"How do you do, Arthur?" said the fisherman cheerily. With the young man's advent there was promise of a gossip. Lewis Wiseman dearly loved a confab with an appreciative person, which Arthur Wilsonholme certainly appeared to be.

The young fellow came carefully down the path and presently stood beside him. "What luck?" he queried.

"Poor, very poor, one mullet and a couple of perch."

"Not too bad at all, Mr. Wiseman. I cannot even entice that many when I wield a rod."

"It's your own fault, Arthur. You should use worms, not dough. Why, what do you expect to catch with that stuff?"

Lewis Wiseman glanced over the rims of his horn spectacles at Arthur Wilsonholme. The old gentleman was beginning to wonder what had brought him down here in his best grey suit, blue tie, new boots, and delicate grey felt hat. Certainly not a simple love of the piscatorial art!

"You are very smart this morning, Arthur," he remarked. "Whither away so elegantly? 'Tis spring, you know."

Arthur Wilsonholme colored slightly, and his small grey eyes wandered to the river. "Yes, spring is here again," he answered, well-assumed diffidence in his voice. He glanced at the interested face of his interlocutor, then back again to the river, then laughed in a shy constrained manner.

"The fact is, Mr. Wiseman, I wish your permission to er—ask Miss Agnes to be my wife." The truth was out and the young fellow's face crimsoned with embarrassment.

"God bless me," ejaculated Lewis Wiseman, turning his attention to the line dangling over the water. "God bless me, Arthur!" and again,

"bless me—bless me!" in a sort of unconscious refrain. His evident surprise did not allay the young man's nervousness. He flicked the thin cane ruthlessly against the precious willorouk and blinked his small eyes.

"Arthur!" the old gentleman's tone admonished his thoughtlessness. The cane halted in its switching.

"How well the tree is looking, Mr. Wiseman."

"Splendid, isn't it? The fruit is fast ripening. In a month or so it will fall."

Lewis Wiseman's deep voice disturbed a fish that had risen near the surface of the river. With a swift side plunge it stirred the water and disappeared, a silver fin upraised showing the path of its flight. Lewis Wiseman drew in his line with a short sigh. "I shouldn't wonder if that wasn't the big one," he murmured to himself. Arthur Wilsonholme stirred impatiently.

"You haven't answered me yet, sir," he said.

"Er—Arthur, what's that?"

"I want an answer to my question, sir." There was growing courage in the young man's voice.

Lewis Wiseman laughed shortly. "Do your best, my boy," he answered, pleasantly.

Wilsonholme turned quickly. "I shall test my fate at once," he replied, facing the steep ascent.

"You have my best wishes at all events," said Lewis Wiseman, noting his sturdy build and the clear, fresh expression in the young fellow's eyes —that they were small was not his fault.

"Thank you, sir," said Wilsonholme, simply. Humming a tune, he reached the top of the path whence he could see the house—that shrine which harbored his goddess. His heart beat furiously, and his hands were trembling at the prospect of the interview. "Will she have me," seethed through his brain in thunderous repetition.

Behind him the father of the goddess baited his line afresh, murmuring "bless me! bless me! little Agnes, a woman at last."

Agnes had just popped the gingerbread into the oven when Arthur's knock sounded on the front door. "Whoever can it be," she murmured, dusting the flour from her arms and pulling her sleeves down. A few deft pats to the golden hair, and she crossed the flagged pathway from the kitchen to the house, and opened the door just as Arthur was preparing to repeat his knock.

"You, Arthur," she cried gaily, offering him her hand. "I wondered who it could be at this early hour."

The young fellow could not answer for the moment, various emotions making it impossible.

He could only clutch the little hand, with its flour-tipped nails and shake it vigorously.

"How are you, Agnes?" he gasped, at last.

"Quite well, thank you, Arthur," she answered, scenting danger, as a deer far off scents the hunter.

"Won't you come in, and presently I shall bring you some fresh gingerbread." There was banter in her voice as he released her fingers and followed her in.

"I'm not very fond of gingerbread," he began, hurriedly, then blushed furiously. "At least," Miss Agnes, if you have made it, why, that makes all the difference. I shall enjoy it."

"Indeed," laughed the girl, pink signals stealing to her cheeks. She looked so dear standing before him, the corners of her mouth raised bewitchingly, that Arthur forgot his nervousness in the flood of tenderness that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Miss Agnes," he faltered.

The girl affected not to hear. "I am so glad you came to-day," she said, brightly. "Mother's little terrier has been sick, and as we cannot find any ticks in it we do not know what can be wrong. You are so good with animals, Arthur, I'm sure you will know. Shall we go and see it?" Agnes turned swiftly towards the door. But Arthur had not donned his best grey suit merely

to prescribe for a sick dog, so he did not move.

"Miss Agnes," he began, once more tightening his hold on his thin cane. How Agnes hated that cane!

"Yes, Arthur?" The girl resigned herself to what she guessed would follow. How many times had she warded it off!

But Arthur was suddenly dumb. The elaborate speech he had prepared so carefully fled from his memory. Agnes moved to the table, the corners of her mouth twitching.

"Yes, Arthur?" she repeated, kindly.

"I have loved you very dearly, Agnes," Arthur began hurriedly, struggling with an improvisation. "For years, in fact"—his small eyes blinked with the strength of his devotion.

The girl did not move, only stood with her eyes downcast and her lips held firmly between her teeth. Arthur came a little nearer.

"You know I love you, Agnes," he said, his voice shaking like a leaf that quivers in the wind. "Can—can—you reciprocate—my—affection?" A sigh of relief escaped him. How fortunate that he should remember that phrase after studying the dictionary so long in search of the right word. So great was his relief that courage returned, and he ventured to raise his eyes to the goddess. Dear girl, how affected she was. She hid the trembling of her lips behind a hand-

kerchief. Arthur longed to kiss those lips, but his courage was of the Netherlands, so he remained where he was.

Agnes spoke at last. "You surprise me, Arthur," she answered, with intended prevarication. "I have not encouraged you, have I?"

Arthur's hopes sank to zero. He forgot her woman's wiles in the sudden quenching of his anticipations. Did girls then smile sweetly on everyone, whisper soft words in the dusk in such a delightfully intimate manner that every young man's heart thumped like a sledge hammer. Poor Arthur! Agnes was his first love. He had been but one of many who had aspired to her good graces. Can anyone blame a girl in proving her prowess?

Dejection seized him. "You cannot recip—" he began.

Agnes broke in. If he said that again she would laugh outright.

"Arthur, we have been good chums," she said, going to him and putting her own white fingers on his nervous brown ones, holding so tightly to the back of the chair. "Can we not always be so?"

The light fell through the window and fired the golden hair to a brighter radiance. How intensely desirable she was! He shifted uneasily and gazed beseechingly into the girl's blue eyes,

reading in them the hopelessness of striving for the unattainable. Words were hard to find.

At last, "I'm sorry, Miss Agnes, very sorry, to have worried you like this. Forgive me and forget it." He imprisoned her fingers in a grip that hurt.

"Thank you, Arthur," said the girl, her voice very kind and low. He really did love her, poor fellow! For a few minutes they stood with their fingers linked together; then the sound of a door opening and shutting put an end to the interview.

"It is mother," said Agnes, quickly. "You will stay, Arthur, and talk to her awhile. She likes you very much. Oh, my gingerbread!" swift fear in her voice. "It will be burnt to a cinder. Arthur, how could you?" A wonderful smile lurked about her mouth and in her blue eyes.

With a heavy heart he watched her run from the room across the stone flags to the kitchen. Then Mrs. Wiseman came in, such a slender, fragile woman that Arthur Wilsonholme, smothering his disappointment, crossed the room quickly and guided her to a chair.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wiseman," he cried.

"Good morning, Arthur, was Agnes in here just now? I thought I heard her voice."

"Yes, she was, but has just run over to see to her cooking," he returned.

Mrs. Wiseman turned to him. "I do wish you would have a look at Merry," she said, anxiously. "I am convinced there is a tick in him though the others cannot find it, and I—" with a wistful outward movement of the hand, "I am useless when it comes to looking for anything."

She led the way to the verandah, shady and cool with grape-vines and climbing roses. In a corner a small terrier lay dozing. At sight of his mistress it wagged its tail, but did not rush forward as it always did when strangers came.

"Where is he?" asked Mrs. Wiseman, waiting for the sound of his canine footsteps.

Arthur went to the little dog. "Here he is," he said, "in the far corner. He does seem apathetic. Get up, Merry; let me feel round you." Deft fingers probed the dog's body. Arthur examined all the likely spots a tick would make for, talking to the animal as he investigated, lifting each paw, and prodding the cushioned pads beneath. As he pressed one of the front paws the tiny dog barked suddenly in pain.

"Aha, here it is," said Arthur.

"Yes," said Mrs. Wiseman, eagerly. "It is a tick, Arthur? I was not mistaken?"

"No, it is not a tick, Mrs. Wiseman. It is a thorn, festering. When did they look at him?"

"Two days ago," she answered.

"Ah, it has taken time. You have been in the brush some time? It is a poisonous thorn and has worked into the system slightly."

"Yes, we were there a few days back. Can you get it out, Arthur?"

A few quick touches and the thorn was out. Merry licked the hand of his benefactor in gratitude.

An odour of burnt gingerbread pervaded the air. Rising quickly, Arthur said he must not stay any longer.

"You will wait dinner, surely?" queried Mrs. Wiseman in surprise. Arthur's visits were generally prolonged to their utmost.

"Not to-day, thank you, Mrs. Wiseman," he answered, his voice suddenly threatening to fail him, as keen disappointment and shattered dreams flooded his mind, and the mental picture of his own farm homestead rose before him, lonely and desolate, bereft of a girl's dream presence.

As he rode away on his shining chestnut filly, a pure bred collie trotting at his heels, Lewis Wiseman reached the top of the steep path above the fishing hole.

"Bless me," he panted, shading his eyes from the sun's glare. "So she's flouted him, the hussy."

CHAPTER IX

Jealousy

THOUGHTS are merely birds of passage, coming and going, wheeling, skimming, falling, rising through shadow and sun, o'er land and sea. A few are prisoners hidden deep in the heart's dungeons, locked under, with a heavy stone placed on top so that none might hear the groans and sighs beneath. As Agnes Wiseman walked slowly towards the orchard, her workbag swinging at her side, to and fro, in rhythm with her footsteps, high, tender thoughts filled her mind. The pureness of her love, its richness, completeness, its whole dominion of herself, uplifted the girl to realms as far removed from humdrum everyday life as Elysium from Pluto's dismal realm. Tender mirth edged the sweet lips and dwelt in the dewy eyes. She lived again through that sunny morning when the shadows of the plum trees moved across the earth in a slow caress, when the whisper of the birds in the tree tops stole in liquid song to her ears, and the bubble of the brook filled the air with running music. The

world had changed since then, unutterably. She still dwelt on heights of bliss, the sky above unshadowed. Under the trees, her footsteps noiseless in the grass, she passed, petals white, pink, cream and crimson, falling round her in a coloured shower.

Beneath the peach tree, favoured by Annette, she paused, eyes roving over the landscape. At the foot of the hill a quince hedge straggled, irregular, thickly twisted, one branch within another, the blossoms scenting the air heavily, and mingling with the pear trees, which stretched like a canopy of white above the quince hedge and a little to the left of Agnes. In the orange trees, where fruit still hung like golden lanterns, some noisy rosellas chattered.

Agnes seated herself leisurely beneath the peach trees and took out her sewing—a wisp of ribbon, a yard or two of lace, a snip of buckram shaped in a curve to fit her mother's head—that dear gentle mother so patient under her affliction. Agnes loved making these dainty caps, beneath which the pale face looked like some rare cameo, so fragile, it seemed the smallest breath of trouble must shatter and deface it. From above, a small green peach fell lightly to the ground. Agnes glanced up quickly, thinking to see Annette's playful face peeping down at her. But the little girl was not there. Life

just then, to Agnes Wiseman, was a dream filled with a very real delight. Earth was an enchanted palace, the blue dome of heaven, a vast hand, kind, showering gifts in lavish profusion. She could not see—how should she?—the shadow on the near horizon. She gazed through spectacles as yet rosy. Like a frightened bird, fearful of an unseen enemy, she glanced about her, unbuttoned the neck of her blouse and drew forth a fine gold chain. A slender circle, ringed with small diamonds, hung on the chain. It was the ring that Bertram Forbes had given her on his last visit. Years ago it had been his mother's. Agnes loved the old fashioned setting. The dull gold and the stones in their unbroken circle seemed a token of unending love. Surely, though unseen, she had the love of that dead mother whose son she was to wed.

Fastening her blouse, Agnes slipped the ring on her finger. Hey, presto! To what realms of imagination did that simple action transport her! A rosy flush spread slowly from forehead to chin, to the tips of two small ears as shyly she pressed the ring to her lips. A wagtail, perched on a limb of the peach tree, cocked his head inquisitively on one side as he eyed her. What strange creatures human beings were!

"So here you are?" a gay voice broke in on her reverie. Agnes let her hand fall swiftly to

her side and turned to find Myrtle Parry regarding her quizzically from under sleepy lids, her eyes gleaming coldly blue between thick fringes of pale lashes.

"How are you?" said Agnes, brightly, the quick flush ebbing from her cheeks, humour darting to her aid. She recognized veiled enmity in this charming russet-haired girl, whose voice suggested the changing music of the sea. Myrtle Parry touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Don't move," she said, politely. "I shall seat myself beside you. What an idyllic spot to dream!" her gaze fell on the landscape beneath, on the drift of snowy pear-blossom, on the erratic quince hedge, so insistent in distributing its sweetness. It came slowly back to Agnes, the white hands falling from the shoulders to the fingers curved about the delicate lace and ribbon.

"Do you often come here to dream?" she queried.

"To work," laughed Agnes, her left hand buried in the grass beside her.

"Ah, but you surely dream sometimes," insisted her visitor. "I caught you at it." Her eyes brooked no denial.

"Well, I believe I was just then," Agnes conceded, in a frank, clear tone. She would not

allow vague doubts of this girl's sincerity to assail her, when all the world seemed so fair.

Myrtle Parry folded her gloved hands in the lap of her riding habit, which fitted her figure so perfectly. Agnes noted its finish and the softness of its fine blue cloth. How she would have loved to possess one even half as good, and thought with an inward sigh of her own countrified and badly fitting habit.

"Of whom were you thinking," asked Myrtle Parry, twisting her head so that the sun caught the meshes of her hair and fired it to sparkling glory. Beside it Agnes's hair seemed almost dull and lifeless, and lighter than the pale gold of a daffodil's outer petals.

Agnes started unconsciously. "Of no one in particular," she answered, striving to keep the colour from her face.

Her inquisitor leaned forward, unbelief written very plainly in her scrutiny. "Really," she commented in a cold, hard voice, so that the doubts rose up twofold and worried Agnes.

"Guess who brought me here to-day?" said the visitor, a new light springing to her eyes as she waited.

Agnes shook her head. "How can I guess," she asked, "when I do not know where you are staying."

"I am at Noorong with the Merryfields.

Surely you can guess?" said Myrtle Parry, assumed shyness in voice and manner.

"Arthur Wilsonholme," said Agnes, wickedly.

Myrtle Parry took her revenge instantly. "Bertram Forbes," she answered, a slow gleam of anger burning suddenly in the pupils of her eyes. Agnes did not move. It was a surprise, for she did not know that he was in the district.

"Doubtless you enjoyed your ride on such a glorious day," she said at last, when the forced smile died from her lips.

"It was enchanting."

Agnes turned to her sewing, arranging the lace in folds along the curve of buckram. "You love riding, do you not?" she asked, her thoughts with the little ring buried in the clump of grass beside her.

"Love it! I adore it! Tell me, are you not jealous?"

"Why should I be?" parried Agnes steadily.

"Come now, you should be, and if I read human nature aright you are," said the girl, with the sun-fire in her hair and the coldness of the moon in her eyes.

Agnes flushed in annoyance. "You are very strange, I think." She spoke evenly and very coldly. She trusted Bertram. With such a girl as Myrtle Parry, the very simplicities of life became complex. How could she guess what

stress of circumstances had brought him to her home as the escort of Myrtle Parry?

"Everyone says you are engaged."

The visitor's voice, languid, amused, filled her with rising irritation. Had she come merely to annoy her? She could scarcely conceive it possible. In reality it was the reason why Myrtle Parry had come.

"Mere surmise is harmless," said Agnes, taking a loop of ribbon and fixing it among the lace.

Miss Parry laughed musically. "Nevertheless, you do not deny it," she remarked.

"I must beg you to discontinue," said Agnes. "Such subjects deserve only the most delicate handling."

A rich red died her tormentor's cheeks. "They do, indeed," she answered, with sarcasm, and burning with ill-bred resentment. This country chit dared to lecture her! "You are welcome to your Don Juan."

Agnes Wiseman rose swiftly to her feet, her blue eyes blazing. "Miss Parry," she said, "your rudeness is unparalleled."

"I know it is, but why did you annoy me?"

"I annoy you!" Agnes's sweet voice was incredulous with surprise.

"You lectured me as to what are proper

subjects for conversation," Miss Parry's resentment was still undiminished.

Agnes laughed shortly. "Shall we go to the house for tea?" she asked, after a moment's tense silence.

"If you are anxious. For my part, I rarely drink tea," answered the girl at her feet.

Disdaining to notice the hidden thrust, Agnes led the way under the cool shadows of the orange trees, her eyes smarting with unshed tears, her lips trembling. As she approached the verandah, the sound of voices speaking earnestly reached her ears. Her heart beat rapidly. Was he telling her mother? She cast a fleeting, backward glance at the girl dawdling behind. She did not see the tolerant amusement in the cold blue-green eyes as they lazily followed her. The ridiculousness of this girl's trust almost made Myrtle Parry laugh aloud. She knew, none better, the variable nature of man, had fathomed the masculine spirit, which is for ever stretching out its hands for novelty and fresh sensation. She had quaffed Life's wine until its taste palled.

Yet, why should others find happiness when she could not? The memory of that night when she had walked with Bertram Forbes under the pomegranate hedge came suddenly before her. That night her soul had almost felt young again.

The moon's witchery and the soft stirring of the leaves in the shadows had exercised their old spell, so that the hidden siren in her had put forth its arms to gather the old fruits of power and adulation.

She came up just as Forbes rose to greet Agnes. Beside him Mrs. Wiseman sat in her low easy chair, her little dog stretched full length at her feet.

"Is it Miss Parry, Agnes," she asked, in a nervous manner, subtle intuition warning her of some adverse influence in their midst.

"Yes, it is Myrtle Parry," answered a clear, flute-like voice. "How are you Mrs. Wiseman? You were not out when Mr. Forbes rode up with me so I found your daughter in the orchard, dreaming." She seated herself beside the frail, blind lady, in a protecting intimate manner, that somehow one did not expect.

Agnes flushed at her words and turned towards the open door, murmuring inaudibly about the tea.

Forbes' gaze rested on the lissom form of the girl in the riding habit. He had no idea she could appear so simple. The suggestion of kindness in her attitude softened her whole personality; hitherto he had only seen the coquette. Then he saw Agnes busily setting

the cups on the red covered table and went inside to help.

Myrtle Parry's conversation grew intermittent, her answers vague. What was going on in the dining room? Scarce murmuring an excuse, she went inside to see. She was rewarded by finding two heads very close together peering into a wide, old fashioned cupboard built into the wall.

"I am really growing thirsty," she exclaimed.

Two smiling faces gave her their attention.

"Won't be long now," Forbes assured her. He thought Myrtle Parry recognized life's different values almost as well as he did himself. That she should be consumed with unacknowledged jealousy never entered his head.

"What is it that is so hard to find?" asked Miss Parry, with a glance that took in the plain white wall, the photos of dead and gone Wisemans, the wide old sofa and the stiff dark chairs. A soiled cabbage-tree hat hung on one of these, and the cracked violin case poked its nose from under the sofa. Miss Parry raised her head in a superior manner, and drummed her fingers languidly on the table, so that the cups and saucers broke into disturbed chattering.

"What is it that is always so hard to find?" asked Forbes, waylaying her wandering eyes.

"I'm sure I couldn't say."

"Why the sugar tongs, of course," as Agnes rose with a brisk, "Here they are!"

Miss Parry shrugged her shoulders and watched Agnes leave the room, a small brown teapot poised in her hand. "Only one class of people ever bother looking," she said, turning to Forbes.

"Whom do you credit with such harmless pleasures?" he asked.

"The fools!" she answered, with a quick side glance, and a soft tattoo of high heels on an uncarpeted floor.

"I once assisted in a similar hunt," he remarked gaily, recognizing her pet.

"I have long since passed that crass stage," she observed, turning to study the books in their cedar case.

"Are you sure?" asked Forbes amiably.

Myrtle Parry smiled, and bent her head in order to read a title behind the glass more clearly. Through the blinds a sun-gleam broke into ripples of fire among her hair, but she did not answer him. Nor did she speak much when Agnes returned and led her mother to a chair before beginning to dispense Bungay's hospitality to her guests.

In the midst of the tea drinking a sudden uproar from many canine throats rose without.

"What is it?" asked Agnes, quickly.

A childish voice pitched to a high treble of excitement floated up the steps.

"Mother! Mother! Can't you guess, we've caught 'grandfather.'"

A deeper voice sent Myrtle Parry forth to investigate. Arthur Wilsonholme and Annette were there, fishing rods in hand, and between them held affectionately, by head and tail, an enormous shining perch.

"Hurrah," cried Forbes, coming out, followed by the others. "Where did you get such a monster?"

"Ugh! the horrid thing," murmured Miss Parry, stepping back.

"Who caught him?" queried Agnes anxiously.

"I did, by myself," cried Annette, showering smiles recklessly around.

"I felt sure the worm I found this morning under the peach tree would catch him," she continued, wagging the fish tenderly to and fro in a gentle see-saw. "Arthur helped me to land him though," she added, quickly. "Still I caught him, didn't I, Arthur?"

"Yes, you certainly hooked him," said Wilsonholme, his eyes on Agnes.

Annette went suddenly to her mother's side and a whispered conversation took place. "Shall I put him down father's jug?" she asked. "Think

what a surprise it would be, mother darling; and I'll put a card on its tail saying I caught it."

"No, no, dear," said Mrs. Wiseman, her hands holding the dear head closer to her. "We will ask Katrin to cook it for to-morrow's breakfast."

"Whole," said Annette, eagerly.

"Any way you like," said her mother, laughing, as the small daughter slipped away, seized the fish from Forbes, who was admiring its length, and, racing to the kitchen with an excited whoop, presented it to a much astonished and loudly applauding Katrin, with many instructions to cook it whole for tea.

"I knew as luck as would come to this house to-day," babbled the old servant, as much excited as Annette.

"Why, Katrin?" she asked, as she hunted eagerly for the sharpest knife in the drawer.

"Because I changed my stockings this morn," said Katrin. "I put the right one on to the left foot and that always brings luck to a house. My dear mither in ould Ireland tould me that, dear wan." Katrin chopped the head off 'grandfather' with a mighty blow.

Annette shuddered, but felt she must see her wondrous haul safely into the pan. When at length the fat spluttered with blue smoke and 'grandfather' lay helplessly in the largest dish

available she went back to the verandah. But even her mother had disappeared.

Annette lifted her voice in an exasperated call. "Coo-ee, coo-ee," came floating back.

With a flutter of short skirts and her long pigtail flying Annette raced down the steps, through the garden to the sliprails leading to the orchard. Spying the group under the peach tree, she remarked in a tone of much satisfaction. "They're all down at Mrs. Pritchard's. How flustered the poor dear will be! I must really go to her assistance. And her legs so bad too."

She pretended not to hear "Mr. Ho. Ho's" joyous "Hello, Miss Annette Wiseman," as she approached, and twisting her slim body into the lower limb of the tree, drew the thin black legs after her with a dignified jerk.

Miss Parry eyed her curiously. "Why do you get up there?" she queried, flicking the limb with a short silver-knobbed riding crop.

"Because Mrs. Pritchard is so nervous," said Annette guardedly.

"Mrs. Who?" asked Miss Parry, in surprise.

But Annette affected deafness and climbed to a higher limb, where she began to talk in a low tone to the imaginary lady. Underneath her, voices chatted briskly, discussing local topics gaily and amid much laughter.

"Where's Hal?" Miss Parry at length inquired.

"He's out on his selection to-day," said Agnes.

"How dreary. Does he often go?"

"Fairly so. You see, it is compulsory."

"And Gilbert? I haven't seen him about," her blue-green eyes roving across the cultivated fields.

"He is in town this afternoon, unfortunately. He will be sorry to have missed you both."

"I should like to have heard his violin. He plays, does he not?"

Agnes glanced sharply at her visitor. She knew Gilbert's music was a source of amusement to some, and she was not in a mood to brook Miss Parry's sarcasm.

"Yes, he plays a little," she answered shortly.

Sunset gilded the low-lying range of hills in the west. Waning daylight, like a great tired bird, rested vast wings of cloud, crimson, purple, orange—over the hill tops, shadowing them in a silent caress. Kookaburras were laughing in the cedars, and from the pig trough stole smothered grunts of satisfaction. Under the pear trees Mrs. Wiseman stood, her beautiful eyes fixed steadily on the blinding glory of the west. Moveless, she stood, hands folded before her, the delicate face illuminated with an inward fire. Seeing her thus, motionless, as some zealous sun worshipper, Agnes Wiseman's eyes

filled with sudden tears. How well she guessed the prayer filling her mother's heart, the deep abiding patience of her soul! A short unspoken prayer sprang to the girl's lips—that the morrow might dawn as brightly as to-day had set.

Myrtle Parry and Arthur Wilsonholme were advancing towards the lone figure under the pears, leaving Agnes alive to the fact that Bertram Forbes stood silent beside her, his eyes on her face.

"How I love you, Agnes," he said, gently.

A rustle of leaves above and they both glanced up remembering Annette's presence. Eyes met in a smile. "When did you come?" she asked.

"Last night—to find the Merryfield's already had another visitor," with a whimsical shrug of the shoulders, and eyebrows raised in Miss Parry's direction. "May I come to-morrow, Agnes?"

She hesitated, turning things over swiftly in her mind. Would her father return to-night or would the morrow find them uncertain as to his whereabouts. After all he had gone with Gilbert to the town. Still doubt assailed her. A shadow quenched the light in the blue eyes, as she turned her face to him. "Would it be too long to wait until the day after?" she asked, stooping to pick up her neglected sewing.

His hand fell over hers quickly in a strong

caress. "It will be an eternity, Agnes, but I will come then. Will you be waiting here?"

The others were coming back towards them.

"Yes," she answered, breathlessly, for his hand hurt.

The sun slipped behind the hills as the visitors rode away, Arthur Wilsonholme with them.

Katrin's voice could be heard calling from the dining room. "Oh sure, and I'll be quite daft, an' you don't come soon. De'il fly away with the gintlemen. Is it the wan with the cheerful smoile or the wan loike an oyster?"

"Where is Miss Annette, Katrin?" asked Agnes, coming in.

"De'il knows," answered the old servant, lifting the cover and glancing approvingly at 'grandfather' ensconced on his dish.

"Mr. Hal's home," she remarked, giving the breadknife an extra polish on the sleeve of her dress.

"Katrin!" Agnes's voice was horrified.

"Sure and what does it matter, dear wan," remarked Katrin, unabashed.

Agnes went outside to the orchard fence. "Annette, Annette," she called from the slip-rail.

"Yes, I'm coming," piped a shrill voice. "I'm just rubbing Mrs. Pritchard's legs with methylated spirits like Katrin rubs hers."

Katrin, half-way to the kitchen, heard, "Oh

the dear choild," she breathed fearfully, "she'll be giving me away yet, with her koind heart."

When tea was over, Gilbert came in, slowly, his footsteps lagging a little as though tired.

"Father home?" he asked.

Agnes looked up quickly, her hair shimmering in the candlelight. "I thought that you were together," she said.

Annette's small face puckered with disappointment and her portion of the fish became suddenly savorless. "I hate fathers," she murmured rebelliously, pushing her plate away.

"Hush, dear," said Agnes, quietly, pouring out Gilbert's tea.

"He said he must see old Simson about some cattle?" said Gilbert, helping himself to a second spoonful of sugar.

"Leave a light in his room to-night." Mrs. Wiseman's gentle lips had hardened to a tight line of suffering. Hal leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"Did you feel the glorious sunset, mother mine," he asked with forced cheerfulness.

"Yes, dear son," she answered.

Annette recovered sufficiently to pass her plate for another helping, remarking in a heartless manner, "Let us eat it all and not leave a bit," and so zealously did she make the attempt that Hal was obliged to extract a fish bone

from her small throat before many minutes had passed.

In the night Agnes woke suddenly, heavy oppression on her heart. She rose, noiselessly, and went to the open window, ears straining to catch the least sound. But only the rattling of the loquat leaves in the orchard could be heard, and the far distant breath of swaying trees. And in the room facing the north, a candle guttered to the socket, flared and went out.

CHAPTER X

Heartache

ANNETTE had a mania for early rising. If she could manage to outdo Katrin in this respect, that day could be counted well spent. Accordingly, the day following Myrtle Parry's visit she awoke when the stars were still shining. Slipping out of bed she stole to the chair where her clothes lay neatly folded, and fumbled for her stockings. Agnes moved uneasily, and Annette sat motionless, one stocking drawn only half way on. Then Agnes breathed evenly again and Annette proceeded swiftly with her dressing.

The light was growing fast outside. Annette feared every star would be gone if she lingered to brush her hair, so hastily tying it back she tiptoed into the dining room. Chairs creaked, cupboards groaned, the very ticking of the tall clock seemed three times as loud as it ordinarily did. At last she stood outside, the dogs fawning delightedly about her; Julius, the tortoise-shell cat, rubbing affectionately against her legs; and, best of all, quite a handful of pale stars

glimmering in the sky. A curious rooster came near and crowed lustily, flapping his russet wings in astonishment. Simultaneously, Katrin emerged from her room at the end of the house.

"Sleepy-head," was Annette's cheery greeting.

Katrin blinked, and, smiling, showed how few teeth she had left. "The top of the morning to ye," she answered, twisting her grey hair into a tight knot behind one ear, and spearing it with a long villainous-looking hairpin. She opened the creaking door of her domain as Annette slipped round to the side of the house. An open door formed a long black oblong, and into the shadows beyond the little girl peered. All was still. A bed showed dimly, white and undisturbed, a pair of heavy boots stood waiting like two sentinels, and lying carelessly on the floor were a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles.

Annette went in and picked them up, placing them on a table with fishing tackle, books, and jars filled with many strangely coloured substances. When she came out she drew a deep breath and walked towards the orchard. Mrs. Pritchard was still a-bed, so the little girl went down to the quince hedge to inquire after a partly-built willy-wag's nest.

Dew diamonds fell from the grass as she passed, and the pear trees stood bravely holding pure cups to the fast rising sun. Somewhere

among them a thrush sang gaily. The whole earth was waking and lifting her voice in a vast song of praise. Cobby, the brown horse, hung his head over a fence and whinnied as Annette passed by, then bit Swagman playfully on the ear and chased him round the paddock in a mad frolic. Annette found the small nest finished. The feathered householder watched her nervously, ruffling his feathers and opening and shutting his black wings. A quince petal fell softly into the nest. Willy immediately flew boldly forward and whisked it indignantly away, then burst into long suppressed chatter, voluble and uproarious.

The sun had just risen when Agnes woke. She put out her hand to pat her young sister's dark locks and encountered only empty space. "At what unearthly hour did that child rise?" she murmured sleepily, then, at a sudden thought, rose hurriedly and sprang out of bed. Outside she saw the dew-wet grass, sparkling in the sunlight, the thick glossy leaves of the loquats, and the tender green of a mulberry tree. Beneath the window the fragrance of young lemon leaves mingled with the delicate scent of tea-roses, and the soft "cluck, cluck," of a hen escorting her cheeping family in the track of the early worm, sounded in a low monotone among her precious violet plants. Agnes leaned

out so that her long hair fell about her in a tangle. "Shoo," she cried, indignantly, waving her hands in quick spasmodic jerks. The chickens, mere fluffy balls of down, scattered to right and left, but their mother stood her ground and eyed this unwelcome apparition with a scornful lengthening of her neck before stalking solemnly away.

Dressed, Agnes bent her steps towards that open door facing the northern hills. She likewise found only emptiness and a burnt-out candle. Katrin was busy in the kitchen. Annette was nowhere to be seen. A song half whistled, half sung, proclaimed Gilbert's rising. Hal was already up, Agnes could see him trying to catch the wily Swagman, who every now and then galloped round the paddock, Cobby at his heels.

The tortoise-shell cat followed Agnes to the orchard. a tiny dead mouse between her teeth.

Under the orange and loquat trees to the gaily flowering peach she walked, drops of moisture falling from above upon the glory of her golden hair. Stooping, Agnes let her fingers sink among the grass stems, thin and wet; rising a slender circlet glistened in her hand, its stones, clear points of white flame.

"To think I should have forgotten you," she breathed, self-reproachfully, twisting it gently

so that the sun hid his laughter in the depths of the diamonds. The mirrored magic opened doors to many unexplored realms. Tender scenes stood shyly forth, new voices spoke, song and mirth stole gladly from secret places, unseen hands played on hidden instruments of wondrous sweetness. "Little ring," whispered the girl, blushing happily, "can you guess how different you have made my life?" Sunlight answered her, and well content, she turned and watched a small form climb slowly up the hill from the shadows of the quince hedge.

Annette reached her breathless, her dark hair in a wild tangle, filled with fallen blossoms and tiny crumpled leaves.

"I was up before Katrin this morning," she cried.

"Were you, dear? Did you race the stars this time?"

A violent nod of the dark head, and Annette twisted herself into the tree.

"Why don't you ask after Mrs. Pritchard, Agnes?" she queried, reproachfully. "You know she is very poorly."

A smile wreathed her sister's lips. "How is she, dear?" she asked, dutifully.

Among the branches Annette's shrill pipe rose questioningly, filled with sympathy. "She says

she is feeling a little better, thank you, Agnes, but thinks that another day in bed will not hurt her."

Annette peering down between the blossoms caught a glimpse of her sister's hand. "Agnes," she asked, a long unanswered question to the surface.

"Yes, dear?"

"Why did—" She paused, then studying her sister, "I don't like 'Mr. Ho, Ho!' Agnes, do you?"

"Mr. who?" asked Agnes, looking up.

"I call him that, you know," said Annette, "Mr. Forbes, I mean, of course."

"Why don't you like him?" asked her sister, earnestly, smiles hidden far down the blue eyes.

"Because," said Annette, enigmatically, chewing a very young peach.

"Spit that out at once, dear," commanded Agnes.

"He called Miss Parry 'dear heart,'" said Annette, spitting out the peach. "And kissed her too," she added, reflectively.

The smile in her sister's eyes died suddenly. "Come down," said Agnes, quietly, "and tell me all about it, Annette."

The child slid down. "Where did you get that ring, Agnes?"

But Agnes did not answer, only drew the brilliant circlet off her finger and slipped it into the pocket of her apron. "Who has been telling you these things," she asked, when the sudden contraction of her throat had relaxed.

"No one," said Annette, "I saw him. Benjamin and Thomas did too. It was the night of the ball at Tarawingee. We were—" Annette paused, remembering she had not yet confessed about that delightful evening under the pomegranate hedge. The noisy gobble of the turkeys rose on the air and the muffled hoofbeats of the exasperating Swagman.

Agnes's voice was just a little changed when she spoke again. The sunlight had left her heart, had faded from her eyes, leaving them dull like turquoise. Her hair, an aureole of golden mist, blew about her forehead caressingly, hiding the tiny ears with its silken strands.

"I'm glad you don't like him," said Annette, in a relieved tone as she climbed up the tree again.

"Are you?" answered her sister dully, slow crimson rising to a white, pained face. How happy she had been in her fool's paradise! How changed the world had been since—how changed now! The blackness about her seemed like some awful night, with the wind blowing fierce and cold, filled with a dreary meaning.

How she had given her heart, her very soul, scorning the love which gives but half. Yet in the zenith of her happiness he had dared to trifle thus, had made of her love a mockery, a thing to be cast aside lightly, without thought. Agnes trembled with white-hot anger, and her eyes were blind with pain as she stumbled back under the orange trees, through the grey sliprails to the shelter of her own room.

Unconscious of the mischief she had wrought, Annette remained in deep conversation with Mrs. Pritchard.

When the sounds of daily life came once more to Agnes's ears, when the fact that a busy morning was passing swiftly by, unheeded and full of neglected duties, the poignant pain in her heart seemed unbearable, as though some cruel hand had thrust into it a two edged sword and left it there. Then slowly on her dulled senses stole the sound of deep persistent sobbing and the murmur of harsh monotonous voice.

Agnes rose swiftly to her feet, throwing back her dishevelled hair with a quick angry gesture. So this was how her father had returned?

She found her mother in the dining-room standing before her father, who was seated uncertainly on a chair. The sight of his face sickened the girl. "I hate him. Oh, how I hate him," a voice cried within her soul, as she

hastened to her mother's side. Could this really be her father who had given her her own being? She shuddered as she stared at him, sitting there inert and helpless in his chair, pouring forth a vile stream of abuse and invective at the gentle, fragile woman before him.

"Father!" her voice commanded him. He turned heavy, dull eyes upon her, silenced for the instant.

"What's the matter, Agnes?" he asked, thickly.

"You had better go to your own room and lie down," she answered, turning to lead the way.

"No, no, I won't," he answered, wickedly obstinate, and firing a volley of oaths at his weeping wife.

Like an avenging angel, Agnes stood over him. "Stop it," she said, so quietly and determinedly, that the coward in every drunkard's soul quailed before her. But only for a second, for the torrent broke out afresh and turned on her.

"Agnes, dear," cried her mother, aloud in anguish of body and soul. "Leave us, child, and presently I will quieten him."

"I will not leave you, mother. Come with me and I shall ring the bell and bring Hal in from the fields."

"Leave Hal alone," stormed Lewis Wiseman,

savagely, rising as though to strike the girl. Undaunted she faced him, and presently his arm fell as he began to weep maudlin tears of self pity. "Why will you always take things the wrong way," he blubbered. "You go against your old father in every way you can."

Agnes did not answer, only a slight trembling shook her from head to foot, and the colour in her face whitened to chalk.

"Come, Lewis," said his wife, rising and taking him by the hand. "You will feel better when you have had a cup of coffee and a sleep. Tell Katrin to bring it to his room, Agnes, dear," turning to the girl beside her. Shuddering, the girl watched the blind wife lead her husband to the northern room, the sound of his spasmodic sorrow beating into her brain like drops of blood.

CHAPTER XI

Cynicism

FILLED with importance Annette sat perched on the lowest limb of the peach tree awaiting the appearance of "Mr. Ho, Ho." Agnes had entrusted her with a message. Her thin legs dangled vigorously above the green carpet of weeds and grass. In one hand she clutched a small packet; with the other she held on to the limb above her. She was talking to Mrs. Pritchard when he came. At first she was not aware of his presence, for Mrs. Pritchard was an exacting lady and liked people to look straight at her when they spoke to her; so, of course, Annette could not see who was behind her when she was gazing at such an exacting lady.

"Hullo, Miss Annette Wiseman." His voice so unexpected just then, nearly sent her off the limb.

Regaining her equilibrium, Annette bowed solemnly. "Good afternoon," she said, coldly, for Agnes had told her, no matter what happened she must be dignified, because she was

representing her. Annette's heart swelled at the thought as she held out the packet.

"My sister wished me to give you this," she said. "Unfortunately she could not stay at home to-day. She had to go visiting."

Bertram Forbes' face changed curiously. The lips grew sullen, the face lowering, the cheery smile gave way to a cynicism of expression almost repulsive. "Like attracts like," he remarked, fingering the packet carefully. Laughing mirthlessly, he added, "What a poor opinion you have of yourself, old man?"

Annette coughed. "What's in the packet?" she queried. "P'raps it's something nice!"

A humorous glint lit his eyes. "Perhaps," he admitted, slowly unwrapping it.

A thread of gold embedded in green velvet, a sparkle of pure white gems in the sunlight, and Bertram Forbes smiled bitterly at their brilliance, twisting them this way and that, so that the fire broke loose and scintillated into the colours of the wizard opal.

"I thought she was different to the others," he muttered. A sudden wrenching of hinged covers, a ring of living fire falling through space, and he had placed an angry heel upon its beauty, burying it savagely, deeply into the ground; then with a smothered oath the broken case went whirling high into the now falling blossoms

of the peach tree. Turning, he surveyed Annette, who had silently watched its flight.

"What's the matter with him," she wondered. "He is all trembling like old Gyp when he gets the mange. Why did you do that?" she asked, pointing accusingly to where one half of the case hung helplessly on a spike high above them.

"How the devil jests with us," he answered, "delighting in his own good time to thrust our deficiencies back down our own throats, their taste more bitter than the vilest concoction any witch could make."

"In my fairy book—" began Annette, able to understand the reference to the witch; but Bertram Forbes was striding away from her. He neither paused nor glanced back, and presently the little girl heard the sound of galloping hoofbeats grow fainter and fainter down the road. With a sigh she addressed herself to Mrs. Pritchard. "What strange creatures men are," she remarked, with a deeper philosophy than she guessed at.

. . . . . .

After this there followed a disturbing time for Annette. Agnes was ill. In the first place, Annette was moved from her room to a little truckle bed in Katrin's. This on the whole was delightful, even though she had sometimes almost to struggle for breath, Katrin having an

unwholesome horror of fresh air. Sometimes, too, Katrin's room was pungent with a strange odour. Annette wondered for a long time what it could be, until one night she woke up and found the old servant in the act of emptying a glass of sparkling liquid down her throat. When she saw Annette's eyes fixed wonderingly upon her, she slipped her finger in the glass, and applied some of the lotion to a skinny shank, muttering piously, "Dear howly mither, cure my ould pins with some of this precious fluid."

Annette fell asleep watching the process, but in the morning all signs of the "precious fluid" had disappeared leaving behind only its penetrating essence.

Every day she peeped in at Agnes, lying so quietly on her bed, never moving, never smiling, the same dull lethargy in her eyes, day after day, the same cruel pain tearing heart and soul and body. Rheumatic fever, old Dr. McCabe had called it, shaking a shaggy head filled with much assumed knowledge.

Lewis Wiseman hated doctors, and refused to believe him, until his sister Fanny Marriott drove up one day and rated him soundly on his obstinacy and pig-headedness and want of proper feeling, that he began to modify his opinions somewhat.

One of Aunt Fanny's nieces, a nurse from the

city came and nursed Agnes. She was short and stout, and Gilbert promptly fell in love with her. As he rode to town, a list of necessaries for the invalid in his pocket, he would while away the miles by repeating her name.

"Emily Marriott, Emily Marriott." At each repetition the name seemed to grow more euphonius, until Gilbert felt positive that there had never in history or romance been a dearer or sweeter name.

About this time too, the district gossips had something over which to wag their tongues. Myrtle Parry and Bertram Forbes were engaged. Two flirts combining forces! Had anyone ever heard of such a preposterous thing? Of course it could not last! Heads were shaken, whispered scraps of gossip floated and circulated mysteriously! How many hearts had he not broken? How many had yielded to her wilful sway? The district held its vast sides and laughed openly, forgetting the trivial fact that Agnes Wiseman lay ill, hardly cognizant of her slow recovery and sudden disappearance to the home of Aunt Fanny, who lived with another daughter in a small fishing village eastward from nowhere.

CHAPTER XII

In Tarawingee Cellars

IT was Sunday afternoon. The atmosphere was heavy and oppressive, with a menace of a storm in the north-west. Inside a rough slab cottage sat, or rather lounged, a ring of silent figures. Men with coloured shirts, open at the neck, showing the red burnt skin—arms sinewy, superbly strong, bared to the shoulder, for the day was intensely hot, and coats had been discarded with unspoken accord. The women unfastened the collars of their coarse calico dresses, and let the tiny breeze fan their throats, and kept the flies at bay by waving vigorously fronds of tough bracken, gathered from the steep bank of the creek.

Head propped in his brawny hands, red hair ruffled until it stood belligerently on end, a thin-faced youth read a paper aloud to an audience breathless in its attention. On a roughly constructed lounge Sol's long figure reclined. Smoke wreaths from his short black pipe floated slowly towards the rafters as though loath to hurry from the sound of that

monotonous voice reading so cautiously, so deeply conscious of its exalted position as distributor and interpreter of the week's news. Each page was read thoroughly, each item digested after due deliberation, commented upon freely, condemned or applauded.

"I dunno," drawled a voice languidly, "as 'ow that coach driver could 'a' bin sober, all things considerin'."

"No'm," answered Sol, from his couch, sending an extra puff of smoke ceilingward.

"The paper says as 'ow 'e was perfectly sober," remarked a buxom wench, with an air of feminine finality. The masculine portion of the community was discreetly silent. "Any 'ow, the 'orses bolted and threw the women and children down a precipitous ravine," drawled another voice, putting due emphasis on the last syllable of an unfamiliar word.

"What's a ravine, ma?" asked a youthful aspirant after knowledge.

"I ain't quite sure on the point meself, young man," answered a florid woman with a baby in her arms.

"It's a deep gully," explained the red-haired youth, turning the paper and scanning the print on the other side.

"Go ahead, Bill," admonished Tim, from the

seat under the passion vine growing on a trellis over the door.

"Give 'im breathing time, old man," said the red-haired father of the red-haired youth.

"Shall I read the romance of 'igh life?" asked the narrator, briskly, as though holding up a choice candy to a child.

"Forge along," came the chorus. The romance of high life was really a titbit, wherein the hero and heroine filled such pathetic parts that tears came to the eyes of several sensitive souls.

"And he then shot himself in the stomach with a double-barrelled gun," drawled the red-haired youth with due solemnity, referring to the unnecessary husband of the heroine.

"Good enough for the villyun," commented Tim. "If I'd a bin in the West Indies, I'd 'a' scolloped 'im."

"Scalped 'im, I s'pose you mean," said the stout girl of an argumentative turn of mind.

"Scolloped," insisted Tim, "and alive," vindictively.

"Ugh!" shuddered the girl.

Tim expectorated to the far side of the trellis and grinned. The collar of his shirt flapped in the hot breeze, revealing anchors, crescents, stars, and other devices in keeping with the gentlemanly profession he had once followed.

Why he had given up his seafaring life no one really knew. Sometimes in a prolonged drinking bout he let fall dark hints, wherein were mentioned a possible gallows and an imaginary prison. But when reason reinstated herself in his brain, these horrors evaporated into thin air.

"Who's this coming across the paddock?" asked Mick, the hairy chested custodian of the cellars, glancing through the open door at an approaching rider.

All heads were craned forward. Sol half rose from his couch, and, resting nonchalantly on one elbow, gazed into the steaming, quivering air. "It's the lad," he said, sitting up and knocking the ashes from his pipe.

"Ay, so 'tis," said Tim, screwing one eye into a fantastic contortion of his own.

Admiring glances watched the approach of Benjamin on his small taffy pony. As he rode up Tim pulled his long scalp lock by way of greeting, and, "What a sweat she be in," was his sole comment on the pony.

"She is hot," said Benjamin. "And we didn't come very fast either."

"No, we seen yer pickin' dainty steps like a lady," remarked the stout girl, smiling broadly, as she fanned herself with a bracken frond.

Benjamin slid to the ground. "Sol here?" he queried.

"Reclinin' at ease," said that gentleman's voice from the sofa.

Benjamin went in, leaving his pony at liberty to crop the short herbage without. "Going with cattle to-night, Sol?" he asked, seating himself beside the stockman and laying one hand affectionately on his shoulder.

Sol nodded, blinking through thick clouds of smoke at the boy's eager face.

"It looks stormy, Sol."

"Rain or hail, I'm on the road to-night," said Sol.

"Sol," leaning forward, a world of persuasion in the young eyes, "ask Dad if I may go with you."

Sol considered for a space, an anxious group awaiting his decision, a boy's eyes dilated with the tension of uncertainty. If Sol said "No," it would be hopeless. Without saying a word the lithe stockman rose and went outside to scan the heavens.

Huge clouds in the north-west and a coppery tinge lowering along the northern hills proclaimed the storm track. Tim looked dubious, and spat far beyond the trellis in order to relieve his conflicting reasons for and against the project.

"It might pass," said the stout girl, hopefully.

Sol shook his head. "Doubtful," he said, tersely, one eye on the boy.

Instantly Benjamin's face fell, but he said nothing. Sol studied the heavens again. "You want to come?" he queried, a little anxiously. He knew by Tim's quietness that the old sailor was propounding some novelty by way of substitute if he did not take the boy, and unacknowledged jealously reigned between the two.

Benjamin nodded quickly, eyes widening with anticipation. It would be his first trip to the distant township behind a mob of his father's cattle.

Sol turned and glanced down at Tim, who, deep in thought, was chewing a grass stem. "I'll ask," he said, moving towards the couch.

"Hurrah!" shouted Benjamin. "Dad's sure to say 'yes,' if you ask, Sol. Do you think my pony is able for the trip?"

Sol laughed as he refilled his pipe. "Jest the thing," he answered, carelessly, as he watched Tim throw the grass stem away in disgust. Mick, the guardian of the cellar, got up from his seat on an overturned barrel, shook his mighty body with a heave of great arms and prodigious yawns and, slapping Tim on the shoulder, walked him off to see some pups.

The eyes of those inside followed them, Sol's a trifle curiously.

"Fine batch this time, Mick," said Tim, eyeing the pups. He fixed his felt hat with the bullet holes ventilating its eastern and western walls more firmly on his grizzled locks, glanced over his shoulder at the gossiping group behind, winked solemnly at some mutton birds chattering among the branches of a stringy bark, and muttered in a quick subdued voice, "Calm night, Mick?"

Mick bent over the pups and picking one up, scanned it carefully. "Ay, calm night," he returned, casually, returning the struggling pup to its rightful place.

When they went back, Bella, the stout girl, was pouring strong tea into thick cups, while a youth at her side splashed spoonfuls of brown sugar into each as he passed them on.

On Tim's deserted seat under the passion vine, the red-haired scholar studied the paper, silently and diligently.

"Read us some more astoundin' noos," said Mick, sipping his tea in gusty gulps.

The scholar scanned the pages. "I was only readin' the serial," he murmured, loath to leave it even for a moment.

"We're listenin'," said Tim, smiling at Bella as she handed him the last cup.

Benjamin sat beside Sol, his cup supported in both hands, his face eager as that of a young pilot scanning an unknown sea. None guessed the force that lay behind those boyish eyes, the thoughts that thronged his brain, as silently he sat among his father's workmen, studying their faces, trying to read beneath the slow drawl of deep voices, behind the veil of inscrutable eyes. What rivers he must cross to reach their vantage ground. So engrossing proved the serial that someone rode up unnoticed. A harsh cry of "Can't you 'ear me? Can't you 'ear me?" roused them to the fact that Thomas sat astride his fat taffy pony, the white cockatoo perched on his shoulder, crest ruffled with indignation, strong beak open wide. Bill threw the paper aside and came out. He and Thomas had much in common beside fishing and the love of books.

"Where's Benjamin?" asked his brother, taking his straw hat off and letting the wind fan his hot forehead.

"'Ere 'e are," said Mick's wife, putting the baby in a rude cradle made from a hollowed log.

"You're wanted at home, Ben," said Thomas, running his hand over Cocky's smooth back.

"What for?" queried Benjamin, reluctantly, and without moving from his seat beside Sol.

"Don't know," said his brother, flicking his pony and moving away; Bill sauntering beside

him, the cockatoo flapping its wings with annoyance at the fact.

Benjamin did not go at once. He knew it was his mother who had sent Thomas after him. She did not like to see him among the men so often, and Benjamin resented the way in which she strove to keep him from what seemed to him the very quintessence of life.

"Goin'?" asked Sol presently, regarding him gravely.

"Not unless you go, too," said Benjamin.

Sol smoked on, his eyes on the boy; but Benjamin was stubborn.

After awhile Sol rose slowly and sauntered out into the open. "Looks stormy," he remarked, "worse than before," meaningly.

"What," said Benjamin, anxiously, following him.

"Don't think you had better come if it storms," said Sol, carelessly.

"I'm off home," said the boy, suddenly. "When will you be down, Sol?" he asked, as he caught his pony easily and mounted.

"In an hour," answered Sol, watching him ride away across the yellow grassed paddocks and under the spare shadows of the tall thin gums. "Fine lad," he remarked, to no one in particular, as he seated himself under the passion vine.

The storm seemed to have passed behind the hills as Sol entered Mr. Marchmont's study. Mr. Marchmont was busily writing, and as his pen moved swiftly over the paper he repeated aloud all that he wrote.

"Why this unwarrantable decay of a flourishing industry, when by upholding it the land was beautified and rendered capable of giving its best—utility, comfort, wealth—offering with open hands work to many? It is shameful that a land capable of such profitable cultivation should be left to—" Mr. Marchmont became aware of the presence of his head stockman. He paused, pen tilted upright between inky fingers.

"Yes, Sol?" he queried, impatiently.

"Master Benjamin is anxious to come with me to-night, sir. Don't you think he is old enough to try his mettle?"

Sol's master eyed him vacantly, brain still busy with his paper. He had hopes of standing for Parliament next election, hence much study and writing of lengthy speeches.

"Eh, Sol, old enough did you say? Quite old enough, of course. Where are you going?" He bent again to his paper reading over what he had written.

Sol disappeared. He doubted if "the boss" had even taken in what he had asked, but the

permission would hold good providing that "the missus" didn't begin to fuss round and upset things. But having satisfied herself that the storm had really gone, Mrs. Marchmont could raise no serious objection to the plan. Her son must learn the management of cattle and horses, must be able in the years to come to take his place among the men on the land; must not merely be a figure head as, she feared, her own husband was still in spite of his gallant efforts to overcome his inefficiency. The night was brilliant with moonlight, as the cattle were driven from the yards into the track leading towards the great white gate.

When Benjamin, mounted on his pony, passed the house, he saw the bent figure of his father cast in deep relief against the holland blinds of the study. Cattle and profitable markets had slipped completely from his mind. He did, however, hear the heavy thud of many hoofs, and raising his head for an instant, murmured, "thundering again?"

On the verandah, her face showing plainly in moonlight, stood Mrs. Marchmont, her eyes, proud and lit with a wonderful mother-love as she watched her young son's slow progress in the wake of the bellowing mob. Thomas stood beside her, a little envy in his soul, but no real desire to emulate his brother. He wished to be

a doctor and live in the city where a thousand voices arose, where a thousand scenes passed before one, like the never-ending pictures of a marvellous cinematograph.

Up the long paddock the mob went, Sol and Benjamin guarding the rear, several outriders on either flank, and a dog or two trotting silently at lagging heels.

Benjamin's soul was high with elation. In the moonlight his quick eye flashed, his lips, clean and boyish, were mobile with a hundred expressions. Was he dreaming or was it really true that he was here behind the deep-breathing mob, the low bellow of an impatient bullock sounding in his ears, the pulsing beauty of the night circling about him in lustrous unreality, far and near its low toned music beating like chords from some mighty organ?

As they neared the gate one of the stockmen rode forward, then, turning aside, lowered some slip rails and headed the mob safely out into the dusty highway. Unseen, in the thick shadows of some ti-trees, two or three men watched the cavalcade pass slowly on its way, the sharp barking of an undisciplined pup breaking above the dust muffled tread of heavy bovine feet.

When all had disappeared one of the men

peered from the shadows into the light. "Darn the moon," he muttered. "Say Jacques, can't you conjure them clouds up again and let us get to work?"

A soft quick voice answered something unintelligible, and with a short laugh the trio moved guardedly towards the slab cottage standing solitary and silent beside the steep bank of the creek.

With the departure of the cattle, Tarawingee, like a disturbed child, settled back into the warm arms of mother night, the leaves of the great box trees moving gently like soft uneven breathing, the whisper of running water scarcely discernible above the mysterious souffle of the distant she-oaks.

In the study, Mr. Marchmont wrote until his hand felt cramped and nerveless. Well pleased, however, with his midnight toil, he laid aside his pen and reached out wearily for the decanter standing beside the inkstand. It was empty. Mr. Marchmont frowned, and fumbling with his left hand among a bunch of keys, which dangled from a chain hanging in front of him, selected one. Taking the lamp, he rose stiffly and passed from the study to the cemented path running straight and white beneath the acacias. His footsteps sounded in quick staccato, the jingling of the keys made queer spasmodic music. Above

him a window stood wide and high, letting the moonlight stream in on the huge four poster, draped voluminously with heavy white valances, a wilderness of fine mosquito net and rose-budded curtains. In the centre of the wooden bedstead slept his wife, weary of waiting for him, dreaming uneasily of Benjamin and his brother Thomas.

The cellar doors, bolted and barred securely, opened with a loud creak as Mr. Marchmont turned the key and pulled them slightly outward. Entering they swung back into space, almost quenching the light with a sharp gust of air. Mr. Marchmont placed the lamp carefully on a ledge of strong blackwood. Above it towered a cask of giant proportions, the great bung protruding like an old man's nose. Surveying it complacently he let his gaze wander down a long row of simliar casks. Against the white-washed walls, with only the small light from the study lamp to show them up, they seemed twice as big as in the day time. In this night season, when things take on aspects unreal, and thought values are not always reliable, they represented untold wealth to their owner. Stored within their rotund shapes, guarded and circled with strong iron bands, was a delectable drink made from the finest grapes in the country, purified by his own methods. With this on the market,

Tarawingee's fame as a wine growing estate would be assured.

Picking up the lamp, Mr. Marchmont walked thoughtfully between his wine-casks, shadows falling in grotesque shapes upon the walls as he passed. Something fell as he approached the end of the cellar, where the thick dull window, placed high in the wall, let in a murky cob-web hidden moongleam. In the uncanny hush the small noise was doubly intensified, sending a momentary thrill down Mr. Marchmont's spine. Stepping forward, gingerly, he spied a huge grey rat peering at him from behind a bucket.

The rat stared uneasily, and as the light drew nearer, turned, and with a quick movement, which rocked the bucket so that a dull maroon liquid splashed upon the floor, disappeared behind the silent casks.

"H'm, what's this?" said Mr. Marchmont, surveying the bucket curiously. A small glass stood beside it. Picking it up, he dipped it into the bucket, and, placing his lips to the edge of the glass, sipped slowly and with deep appreciation.

"My own brand," he said, aloud. "Who gave orders for it to be left here like this?" He glanced disapprovingly at the bucket. From it his eyes fell to a short black pipe lying on the floor. Stooping, he held it between the tips of

his long delicately-shaped fingers, then placed it gently on the floor again. "A clue to the culprit," he remarked, "and if I'm not mistaken I can guess to whom it belongs."

He glanced at his watch. "Half past twelve," he murmured. "He ought to be here soon if I wait."

Fixing his coat tails he seated himself carefully on the rough ledge, prepared to wait developments. "Why didn't he ask for it?" he said, as he dipped the glass into the bucket a second time.

A sound from the entrance of the cellar caused him to sit very erect and still. The doors were being opened gently, with long slow creaks. Outside voices spoke together, quietly and earnestly, then came the sound of approaching steps, stealthily tip-toe.

Mick, caught red-handed in the petty theft, stood like a statue as he turned the corner of the last cask and found his master sitting rigid and quiet on the wooden ledge. But the man recovered his composure quickly. "Lor, sir, I thought you was a ghost," he said, "I just run across to get my old Black Nance that I forgot this evenin' when he was a-lockin' up! I couldn't make out why them doors weren't locked when I come over. I was sure I locked 'em. Ah, well, things is easy when you kin

read the riddle!" and as if unconsciously, Mick emitted a low peculiar whistle. "I thought I seed a rat," he said in explanation.

"I dare say," murmured his master. "There is one about. Who is Black Nance?" he asked, eyeing his man quietly,

"'Ere she is, said Mick, stooping quickly and picking up the pipe lying on the floor. He turned it affectionately in his hand and wiped some dust from the bowl. "Couldn't sleep without having a last draw," he explained. "So I says to the missus; I'll just run across and git my little friend and then to bed."

"Why was this left here," asked his master, pointing to the bucket.

Mick eyed it solemnly. "Curious," he said. "Them boys must 'a' left it here. I'll have to blow 'em up in the morn."

"Never mind, Mick," said his master. "No doubt it was overlooked. If there was another glass, Mick, I'd ask you to have a drink."

Mick let his small ferret's eyes rest furtively on his master's face, then with a hitch to his baggified trousers, moved diffidently between the casks and emerged with a tin pannikin in his hand. "We allus leave this 'ere with a drop o' water in it," he said.

The effect of Mr. Marchmont's third glass had lent a brilliance to his eyes not always noticeable.

As Mick stood with the pannikin held deprecatingly between rough fingers, his master winked knowingly. "Water, Mick, is a fair beverage, though the ancient gods of Greece seemed to favour something with a more pronounced flavour." Mr. Marchmont paused to take breath.

"Jest so," remarked his faithful henchman, dipping the pannikin into the bucket.

"If the ancient gods held the grape in such high esteem," continued Mr. Marchmont, waving his glass solemnly back and forth, and keeping his eyes rivetted on Mick, "we can scarcely do less, can we Mick?"

"No, that's true," agreed Mick, refilling the tin pannikin.

Mr. Marchmont refilled his glass also and silence reigned for a time.

The grey rat hovered for an instant round the corner of the cask, wondering if the intruders had departed. A long indrawn breath sent him scampering away.

The moon sailed beyond the box-trees, sending sharper gleams through the dust-dimmed glass, and still master and man drank slowly, glass after glass, of that same delectable drink, refined and purified by the latest and most up-to-date methods. With each potation Mr. Marchmont waxed more loquacious, wandering from imag-

inary speeches to imaginary crowds and lengthy dissertations on grape-growing and wine-making. As his master became talkative, Mick fell into a sullen stupor, until worldly things faded so completely away that neither heard advancing steps nor the quick smothered voices of men. Two dark forms were slouching down the cellar, peering in a curious expectant manner into each small aperture between the casks. "Somethin' must 'a' 'appened," muttered the coarse voice of the first stranger to his comrade following behind.

"Surely," answered a soft guttural voice.

"Light ahead," said the first speaker, moving more guardedly and dodging swiftly in and out between the casks.

With their unexpected advent the rat, which had come out again, scurried to shelter a third time.

"Gentlemen, listen to me a moment longer. Is there a man who does not agree with me in deriding the forces which have allowed American tobacco to be imported, free of duty, into a country which is fully capable of producing its own tobacco, of a quality too, far superior to that which is imported?" The words were fast growing indistinguishable, but the voice kept on, scarce pausing an instant to take breath.

From behind their ambuscade the strangers

looked askance at one another. "What the devil," muttered one, then stepped forward as a prolonged snore split the heavy musty atmosphere. "Good Lord!" he ejaculated.

His companion emerged also and stood gazing at the unexpected scene. Mr. Marchmont became dimly aware of their presence.

"Good morning," he said, affably.

Neither of the strangers answered. "Talk about the ridiculous," said one. "'Ere we've been, Jacques, waitin' for somethin' to wet our whistles while this corrobboree 'as been goin' on, and we a-stewin' and a-wonderin' what was up."

Eyes fastened on Mr. Marchmont, the man addressed as Jacques smiled slowly, his white teeth gleaming like points of ivory. In the dim light he looked strangely sinister. Bending over the sleeping Mick, he shook him vigorously. "Wake up, wake up," he said, in a soft sibilant voice. "The moon wanes and we must be gone before day dawn." Mick blinked uncannily. "Easy there," he muttered, noisily, "I ain't asleep. What the devil is the matter?"

"Michael," said Mr. Marchmont, drowsily, "who are these gentlemen?"

"I ain't goin' ter interdooce yer," he muttered, stumbling to his feet.

" 'Ere chaps, let's get 'im up to the study and then we'll go."

"Excellent," muttered the man called Jacques.

"Dear me," murmured Mr. Marchmont, as they helped him to his feet, his coat tails dragging unnoticed in the dust of the ledge. "I am quite capable of assisting myself gentlemen. If you will only listen patiently a little longer, while I expound a few more important theories highly necessary to the welfare of the colonies."

"Jest so," mumbled Mick, lurching forward between the casks, his master supported by the strangers bringing up the rear.

An hour later a cart was driven quietly from the cellar doors. "Got a pretty decent supply this trip," drawled a rough voice to the man sitting silent on the round fat keg strapped securely to the seat.

CHAPTER XIII

The Cattle Sale at Wilton

THERE was a hum of voices in the air like the dull droning of a bumble bee. In Wilton, on a Thursday, one could always count on seeing a crowd. In the estimation of many a man for miles around it was the most important day of the week, for was it not the day when they brought their fattened cattle, their horses well-groomed and glossy, their pigs, fat, dusty and obstreperous, to the market? As each eventful Thursday passed they looked forward to the next. Life was measured into drowsy spaces broken only by the exhilarating landmarks of "sale day."

The high smooth fence which marked the yard into numerous divisions was lined with men. In the centre, on an elevated platform, stood the auctioneer—a ponderous man of immense girth, a man of ready wit, with a tongue well-oiled and hung loosely on its hinges. From his place of vantage his eyes roved nimbly among the crowd, well able to see the half raised finger or the bare nod of a head which sent the

bids up in leaps and bounds, or, gradually, like the cautious steps of a blind man.

Wedged somewhere to the right of this platform sat Sol and Benjamin—the man alert and watchful—discerning the likely bidders, nodding lazily to the supporters, sifting out the hoaxers and the untried. Beside him Benjamin sat in the ecstatic trance, sacred only to that intensely impressionable period of early youth. Voices fell unheeded on his ears; he saw only the moving mass of cattle beneath, and the majestic figure of the auctioneer above them, turning now to the right and now to the left, his voice eloquent and fast warming to his work. Dust rose in a fine white haze as an impatient beast stampeded round his railed prison, snuffing fretfully at the human barricade above, pawing contemptuously at the ground with his short fore legs.

"Now then, gentlemen," cried the auctioneer. "Here is a yard of some of the finest cattle you have seen for many a day."

Sol's face was unmoved as the auctioneer voiced this opinion. The animals belonged to Tarawingee, and without doubt would have been the delight of any breeder of stock.

"Devon," said the auctioneer, as heads were craned forward to inspect the cattle. "Pure, healthy, and a credit to the land that fattened

them. Now what will you start these at, gentlemen? Nothing under eleven pounds, surely! Eleven, twelve, twelve-ten, thirteen—that's right gentlemen, you know the worth of the real thing when you see it. Fourteen, fifteen—surely not stopping at fifteen—fifteen-one, two!"—and so on.

Benjamin's soul soared upward with the bidding, until the highest price offered that day was reached, and the cattle were knocked down to a lean, tall buyer for sixteen pounds odd.

So exciting and close had the bidding become towards the end that an old farmer, who always cornered the round post at the end of the slippery fence, averring that it gave him room to move his lame leg, was inadvertently pushed off. He fell into the dusty yard of the redoubtable Devons. At first neither men nor cattle noticed him. Then a wild-eyed bullock, annoyed at the unusual sound of so many voices, caught sight of him, lowered his head, glared savagely and, pawing the ground, moved in a short circle in front of the terrified farmer.

"Lord boys," roared the now thoroughly frightened and irate old man. "D— it! Can't you see the animal—"

The "Lame Duck"—Duck was the man's name—was instantly the cynosure of the yards. Benjamin held his breath in alarm, and Sol

was preparing to descend to the rescue when the "Lame Duck" and the bullock, who had been glaring at one another like a couple of bulldogs surprised into action, were enveloped in a whirl of dust.

"Good heavens!" said Sol, showing some excitement, while various shouts rose to "Go it, old boy!" "Never say die." "Tickle his nose for 'im!"

"Come back, Sol," drawled a voice above him. "The old chap's all right. Cured his leg for heaven! The parson 'll say it's a miracle."

Sure enough the "Lame Duck" was clambering up the high eight-railed fence—a lame duck no longer, but a brisk, alert being intent on self preservation. His old seat regained, the "Lame Duck" stared down at the belligerent bullock, stamping and fretting at the foot of the post. "Durn yer," he apostrophized. "What d'yer mean, yer red-coated, agate-eyed crittur."

Simultaneously a ripple of careless, good-natured mirth swept across the yards. The "Lame Duck" was slapped on the back by friendly hands, while a friendly voice drawled "Good for yer, old man! We haven't no lame duck now, he's a blooming swan. Come across and have a long beer with yer 'fectionate pal." The last request was not to be resisted, and the "Lame Duck" slid gracefully from his precarious

position to the solidity of Mother Earth outside the yards, and walked easily and without a limp over to the rough wooden hotel disfiguring the opposite side of the road.

The sale proceeded. The auctioneer's iron throat became rasped, and a youth was sent hot haste to the hotel for something wherewith to ease it. He returned with a jug foaming at the brim. A ring of envious and equally dry-throated corn-stalks watched him drink long and deeply from the broken lip.

A couple of draught horses changed hands, a broken down buggy mare, and two or three yards of "stores"; but while the pigs were being disposed of Sol and Benjamin slipped from the fence and went across to the hotel for dinner.

"Tired?" asked Sol, gravely, sure of his answer.

"No," said Benjamin, bravely.

Sol grinned at a passing acquaintance and pushed a way in between the loud-voiced, boisterous individuals blocking the entrance. They found their way into the greasy, cabbage-scented dining room, and edged into two seats just vacated by a couple of thick-set, hairy-faced giants. A freckle-faced girl came in and served them. Benjamin liked her immensely. She had a brilliant pink bow surmounting her wealth of tousled hair, a smaller one adorned her neck;

her apron had long since forgotten the wash tub, and her nails left much to be desired. Yet she smiled kindly and brought the last piece of lemon pudding to Benjamin; also a glass of hot steaming milk. "Can't spare yer much," she remarked, amiably, as she bumped it down beside the lemon pudding. "The cow kicked the bucket over this morn, an' we're a bit short —busy day too," she turned away, listening to the jests of a group of young fellows who had just come in.

"Say, Sarah," called one. "You look charming in pink. Pink's yer colour all right, ain't it? Got any suckin' pig or the leg of a turkey. It don't matter if it's stolen."

"Stolen indeed," cried Sarah, indignantly. "I'd like to know who the likes o' you are to talk, Aaron Long, wi' yer long nose and yer blinkin' eyes!"

Aaron Long blushed crimson at this scathing reference to his personal appearance. "Steady, my dear girl!" he returned, hotly, "or you'll be left waitin' to go to the Kilkenny ball a fortnight hence."

Sarah's pink bow rose aggressively as she bounced from the room. "There's many another only too anxious to take me, Aaron Long," she flung over her shoulder.

To Benjamin that room was filled with charm.

In one corner sat a little wizened man who ate so steadily and with such continued heartiness that the boy was filled with amazement as to where it all went. Surely he did not carry a leather satchel under his waistcoat, like the hero of childish romance! Beside him a tall, cadaverous stockman lunched lightly on bread and butter and ale; then came a row of hungry youths, who shovelled the food into their mouths on the ends of long unpolished knives with such cold-blooded precision that Benjamin was fascinated.

In the bar, which was separated from the dining room by a thin wooden partition, conversation rose and fell in a steady incessant volume of sound. Not a few hot oaths were flying from corner to corner, a scrap of ribald song was sung, the refrain of an old ballad was whistled, feet were stamped loudly, their owners giving vent to some very decided opinions. Now and then one heard the conciliatory voice of the hotel-keeper pouring oil on troubled waters; at other times a peremptory order sent some too outspoken bushman reluctantly outside to cool his ideas in the heat of a January sun.

"Sol," said Benjamin, "what's the name of this place?"

Sol glanced at the eager boyish face upturned

to his. "This is the ' 'Are and 'Ounds,' " he said, thoughtfully, wondering if he had done wrong in bringing the boy to such a place. Force of habit had sent his footsteps in the direction of "The Hare and Hounds."

"What!" said Benjamin, a trifle perplexed.

"The Hare and 'Ounds," said Sol, pointing to a gaily colored picture on the wall. It depicted a pack of hounds after one small desperate hare.

"There it is," he said, "writ up there."

"Oh," said the boy, enlightenment dawning in his eyes. "The Hare and Hounds," Sol.

"That's her," agreed Sol, tackling a conglomeration of plum pudding and treacle sauce.

"I like this place, Sol," said the boy, dreamily.

"Do yer," said Sol. "It ain't a bad old shanty." His eyes became fixed just then on a figure seated at the extreme end of the long table.

Benjamin's followed as a matter of course.

A thin olive-skinned man, unmistakably foreign, was eating his dinner and listening to the conversation around him.

"Who is it?" queried Benjamin, interested in Sol's scrutiny.

"Dunno," said the head stockman, doubtfully. "Looks kind o' curious, don't he? We missed a couple of springers a month or so back." Sol

fell to work again on the plum pudding and treacle sauce.

Apparently unconscious of any undue attention in his direction, the dark thin man continued to enjoy his meal. For a brief instant only did his quiet, intense gaze turn towards Sol and the eager-faced boy. It did not linger on them, however, but roved farther afield as though distinctive interest in any one person was completely lacking.

The pudding despatched, Sol and Benjamin rose. "You go out that way and wait for me," said Sol, pointing to a door at the side of the room.

"Where are you going?" questioned Benjamin.

"I'm goin' ter pay for the bill of fare," said Sol, moving towards the bar.

Benjamin's reluctance to part with Sol vanished as he emerged into the street.

"Left—right, left—right—left foot first you pumpkin-head!" cried a voice, amid shouts of laughter and rude jest. In the middle of the street, the "Lame Duck," his sails very much to windward, marched and counter-marched, with the energy of an ancient Grenadier. An equally joyous comrade held the position of corporal, shouting his commands in a loud war-like tone,

interspersed with many hiccoughs. Around them lounged a group of interested onlookers.

"Cured his leg for heaven," drawled the same slow voice that had spoken to Sol at the yards. A loud expectoration confirmed the speaker's opinion as he slowly refilled his pipe with strong tobacco. Glancing round he spied Benjamin.

"Well, little feller, so Sol's makin' a man of yer, is he?" a smile twisting the corners of his mouth westward.

Embarrassed with such attention from so high a quarter, Benjamin's tongue refused to answer, but he nodded earnest confirmation to the surmise, and smiled genially into the sunburnt face of his interlocutor.

"And how old be yer?" queried Tim Flannigan, the famous wild rider of the district.

Before the boy could answer, a commotion, somewhat resembling an unexpected whirlwind arose in the bar. "Take it or leave it as yer like," roared a voice, perilously like Sol's.

Interest was instantly diverted from the peregrinations of the "Lame Duck" to the open door of the hotel. Suddenly the oily smug-faced proprietor shot out into the dust of the Queen's highway like a revolving catherine wheel. He lay there for a second a wheezing, sneezing figure, dust-bespattered, bruised and blasphemous. Sol's spare form immediately blocked

the door, a battalion of curious eyes behind and in front of him. Intense quiet prevailed while the hotel-keeper got up and shook the dust from his clothes, and wiped a beer-stained face with a dirty red-starred handkerchief. He held his nose as though it were broken, and coughed blood and oaths with generous profusion into the folds of the handkerchief.

"What's the matter, Sol?" Tim's slow drawl broke the ice.

Sol withdrew aggrieved eyes from the unsteady figure in the road.

"Matter!" he growled. "The man had the impidence to say the quid I gave him wasn't the Queen's. God bless her!"

"Ay, ay," said Tim, lifting his old felt hat with praise-worthy patriotism. "Whose was it then, old man?"

"If it weren't the Queen's," said Sol, still deeply aggrieved, "I dunno whose it was. It was given to me with the full understanding that it were the Queen's and therefore genuine."

During this colloquy the hotelkeeper was uncertain whether to force an entrance into his own domain or to go post haste to the police barracks and give Sol in charge. Dutch courage returning, however, coupled with a deep sense of injury, he finally squared his shoulders and

faced Sol. "I'll have the law on yer for this, see if I don't," he spluttered vehemently.

Sol snapped his bony fingers in fine contempt of such threats.

"The money was counterfeit; hang me if it wasn't," roared the incensed hotelkeeper, moving towards the door, his intentions not very plain.

"Order, order! Fall into line," shouted the erstwhile self-promoted corporal, lurching forward to support the hotelkeeper, thereby seeing a few free drinks in the immediate future.

"Stand aside, yer dirty skunk!" was the hotelkeeper's flowery rejoinder.

The corporal was pulled aside, weeping. "He allus said 'e was my fren'," he wailed in the "Lame Duck's" sympathetic ear.

Across the road the auctioneer's voice rose in its brisk monotone, dispersing the crowd and scattering it in irregular bunches from the hotel door to the high-railed fence. Sol became conscious of his responsibilities towards Benjamin, and moved from the doorway into the street, a wrangling crew following eagerly at his heels.

"It rang thrue, me boy," said one gentleman descended from the kings of Ireland.

"Sure it did that," agreed another.

"Slit his windpipe for a cackling evil-minded

Jew, but didn't you pay at all, at all?" asked a third, anxiously.

Sol stalked majestically through the crowd, not deigning to hear anyone. "McPherson's horses are on now," he said to an excited and bewildered Benjamin. "Come, and we'll do a little bidding ourselves."

Feeling quite six inches taller, the boy followed in the wake of such a hero, a ring of gaping bushmen staring after them.

"Well, I'm blowed," said the "Lame Duck," wagging a sage head with deep solemnity.

Rather glum from his recent experience, Sol climbed the fence and then turned to assist his faithful shadow. Save for a few hours' rest snatched before breakfast, the boy had had no sleep. The novelty of unusual scenes was merely propping his eyes open now, but the prospect of a rest at the "Blue Maid"—the rival of the "Hare and Hounds"—though cautiously propounded by Sol was ruthlessly thrust aside.

"Here's the real McPherson," boomed the auctioneer, indicating two fine satin-skinned cobs. "Look at these, gentlemen. Can you see a flaw anywhere? Shoulders perfect, neck and head superb, legs built for the bush, stronger than iron, sound as the Bank of England. What's the bid, gentlemen? Come, now; on to it."

Bids came from right and left. Pepperday,

the auctioneer, had his work cut out to catch them all. But he proved equal to the task, and the cobs were knocked down at twenty guineas each. Sol had run them up rather diligently, but withdrew at the end and left them to the lean cadaverous diner on bread and ale.

A beautiful chestnut colt was going now. The price started too hot for the majority, and the bidding was confined for the most part to a few well-known buyers.

"Thirty guineas," called Pepperday, cheerily. Sol's little finger went up. "Thirty-one," cried the auctioneer, lustily. "Thirty-one guineas, gentlemen." A nod from afar and the colt's value bounded to thirty-five. Then Sol's finger moved again, and thirty-five changed to thirty-seven. Then a new factor entered the lists and thirty-seven soon rose to forty-five. Sol, quiet for the nonce, scanned the ring of earnest faces, and presently discovered the unknown buyer as the thin olive-skinned man who had interested him at dinner. The bidding was fast becoming hotter. Figures leaped; soon, two or three dropped out of it altogether, and after a while Sol found that it lay between himself and the unknown.

"Why so keen?" asked a steady buyer near him. "You've got your fighting blood up I kin see."

Sol did not reply, but the little finger worked rapidly, and soon the colt stood at fifty guineas.

Pepperday beamed with the zest of the conquest. "Only fifty guineas, gentlemen," he lamented, in a voice that had taken new life. "Fifty-one,—going at fifty-one—fifty-two—fifty-three—fifty-four." The olive-skinned gentleman was obstinate. Sol's face was set like a bronzed mask. The onlookers held their breath and watched to see who would give in first. At sixty-five, Sol's opponent ceased bidding, and amid cheers and shouts, the chestnut was knocked down to Sol.

McPherson, the owner, rode up behind him. "He's worth every cent of it," he said, genially. "I'm glad you got him. Is he for yourself or the boss?"

"Myself," answered Sol, shortly, his spleen even yet not quite dissipated.

The colt secured, Sol and Benjamin slid to the ground, clouds of white dust rising from the impact of their feet.

"Who was your opposer, Sol?" drawled Tam, lazily, smoke oozing from his mouth and nostrils in such quantities that one might well be afraid of his disappearing in the uncanny manner of the Eastern magicians.

Sol shook his head. "Dunno," he answered,

looking round for the man. But the foreigner had disappeared unnoticed.

Under the limp gums the shadows were growing longer as Sol led the chestnut colt down the streets towards the "Blue Maid," which jutted boldly on a corner block of the main street of Wilton. While the colt was being stabled and attended to, Sol and Benjamin strolled up the town, not without attracting a fair share of notice and not a few friendly nods.

"I wonder how them boys are keeping?" soliloquized Sol, as a trio of gay young larrikins sauntered past, reminding him of his own staff. "I wouldn't mind betting a dollar that not one of them turn up to-morrow mornin' to help me get them steers home." For Sol had invested in some young cattle for Tarawingee.

"I saw Bill sitting on the fence," said Benjamin.

"P'raps he's over it now," said Sol drily.

Wilton streets were narrow and dirty. Slatternly women lounged in the doorways, exchanging gossip with some friendly crony, while their children, unkempt and uncared for, played in the gutter.

As Sol and Benjamin passed the gauntlet of curious eyes, remarks none too low followed them.

"Grass seeds come ter see the city," said one.

"I think 'e must be a giant o' the north," said another.

"Lor, what a bonnet," cried another, derision in her strident tone.

"It's to keep the sun off, my dear, so's he won't burn his complexion," cried a fourth.

Sol's hand flew to the brim of his wide cabbage-tree hat. Instantly a fusillade of foolish mirth went echoing down the street.

"You're makin' 'im nervous," was the last they heard as they turned the street corner.

Safely screened by a stout brick wall, Sol stopped short, and "D—— women," escaped between savage teeth.

They went back to the "Blue Maid" by another route. Past trim cottages with gardens and lawns in front—one even had a couple of strange statues standing beside the white-washed steps. At the "Blue Maid" they had tea in a private parlor. Sol had seen to things before going out. Mine host was there when they went in; a short, fair man, with black eyes and a straw-coloured moustache.

"I hope you will like your tea, Mr. Gosling," he said, with a beaming smile.

Sol, somewhat unaccustomed to the sound of his own surname, nearly tied his feet in a knot as he subsided on to one of the stiff chairs.

"Yes, yes; I hope so," he answered foolishly.

"And is this the heir of Tarawingee?" queried the owner of the "Blue Maid," smiling in turn on Benjamin.

Sol frowned. "This is Mr. Marchmont's eldest son," he said shortly. "What have you for tea?"

Mine host affected not to hear just at first; then "Oh, steak and eggs, I believe, Mr. Gosling. I'll send my daughter Marjory in with it. She's a great help, now, is Marjory, especially when I'm rushed on a busy day like this."

Sol grunted something unintelligible, and, drawing his chair up, propped his elbows on the table, refusing to say another word. With a beaming smile at Benjamin "Old Broomsticks" (as Sol mentally designated him) went out, calling loudly for Marjory to bring "the private parlor's supper." Though nearly asleep Benjamin kept his eyes open so that he might see Marjory.

A tall, slender child, with her father's fair hair and eyes of the same colour, only softer and larger, the innkeeper's daughter seemed to belong to some other world than the one in which she moved. With firm little fingers she placed the dish before Sol, then ringing a small bell, went out, forgetting to shut the door after her. Benjamin saw her tripping down the wide hall, her little white-shod feet moving like two mice

playing at hide and seek beneath her long Kate Greenaway frock. Someone called her, and she disappeared under a wonderful bead curtain screening one of the doors. Then Benjamin, spite of supper staring him in the face, fell asleep and dreamed that the bead curtain was the entrance of a wonderful tent. As he, too, lifted it and followed Marjory, there was a burst of music and the loud neighing of many horses. When he looked there was Marjory seated on a black pony, waving her hand to him and smiling gaily, and then he jumped on a pony and rode round and round the tent in a never-ending gallop, while the music grew louder and more piercing as they rode. It seemed only a moment to Benjamin before he opened heavy eyes and blinked up into Sol's face. "What's the matter?" he grumbled, trying to turn over and sleep again.

But Sol was inexorable. "Wake up," he whispered in a voice unaccustomed to such a low pitch. "I must get the boys away before they start drinking again, or I'll never get them steers home."

Very ill-naturedly Benjamin got up, feeling ravenously hungry and extremely cross. "I don't think I'll be a stockman, after all," he remarked, as he scamped the lacing of his boots and promised his face a better wash to-morrow.

The "boys" were all there, waiting orders,

and presently when the thick brown bread and the dish of bacon and eggs had been disposed of, everyone went out into the cobble-paved yard and yawned and blinked sleep out of bleary eyes as the fancy took them.

"The steers are waitin' in a corner of Finnigan's paddock," said Sol, addressing his staff. "You boys git along and have them well on the way by the time we ketch up to you. No loafin', now!"

The staff went off in a body—Bill, the red-headed youth, in the lead.

Sol watched them, the squint in his eye more pronounced than ever. "Just got 'em in time," he chuckled. "Another half hour and they'd a' bin gone."

The sun was barely peeping across the hills when Sol turned his steps in the direction of the stables. In an empty stall beside that which housed the chestnut colt, a groom slept noisily, his snoring vieing with the grunting and growling of a well-filled pig-sty.

Sol surveyed him with disgust. "I wonder where the crittur keeps his corn?" he said, sneezing violently and opening the door of the stall.

"What's up, Sol?" called Benjamin, from the back steps of the hotel. But Sol was speechless. Benjamin ran across to see, and, as though

aware of some catastrophe, the groom woke up with an oath.

"They put it there, last night," said the boy. "I saw them."

Sol turned to the groom, who was sneezing loudly by this. "Where's the colt?" he asked in a dead calm voice.

"Up yer sleeve, I s'pose," said the groom swearing violently.

"Stop that," bellowed Sol, standing over him, one arm upraised.

"Why, blow me," said the groom, frightened out of his wits, "ain't it in the stable?"

"No, it ain't," said Sol, dourly.

CHAPTER XIV

Agnes Meets Old Friends

A NARROW white road hugging the flat shores of a grey lake. Along this road a tilted white-hooded cart jolting and swaying behind a venerable piebald horse. A little wind flapped the side wings of the cart and, passing on, ruffled the waters of the lake; then, catching the drab line of distant forest, went murmuring on until some fiercer wind caught it between strong teeth and whisked it away to realms hitherto undreamed of.

On the verandah of the high, bare house standing on the hill facing the lake, sat an old lady busily shelling peas. Her cap was a trifle awry from constant darting after unruly peas that persisted in popping unexpectedly from their pods and rolling excitedly away under chairs or jamming themselves between the cracks of the flooring boards. She had just seated herself after one of these escapades when her keen eyes caught sight of the approaching cart. "Here comes that old rascal again, I declare," she exclaimed, impatiently opening a

pod so hard that the entire row of peas, flying like small shot from a pea-rifle, scattered in all directions, some even slipped under the wooden balustrade enclosing the verandah.

The tilted cart climbed lazily up the hill, the piebald horse pausing now and again to draw breath, while her master angrily urged her forward with the handle of a stout whip.

"I won't take a thing," said the old lady, with firm determination, as she watched their approach. "I've just got an autumn dress from the city; besides, I bought a whole bundle of rubbish from the old rapscallion a month ago. It serves me right for encouraging him and listening to his family history, be he count or hawker. I'll let him scrape and bow to Agnes for a while; 'twill cheer her and he'll be as curious as a brown beetle wondering who she is, where she came from, and how long she is staying."

With her good ear to windward, the old lady listened intently, an empty pod sitting triumphantly on her thumb.

"Whoa, there, Belle Mahone!" cried a nasal voice from the rear of the house.

"Good day, lady," a perceptible note of ingratiation crept into the voice. No one answering, the sound of something harder than knuckles rapped vigorously at the back door.

The old lady got up reluctantly and went

down the hall, the pea-pod still stuck on her thumb. "Where is Agnes, I wonder," she grumbled as she went. She reached the door just in time to interrupt a second series of loud staccato raps from the handle of the hawker's whip.

"Well. Andrew; back again!" she cried.

"Ay, ay, ma'am. Just got in a gorgeous new stock and I says to myself, 'I'll let Mrs. Marriott have first choice,' so I came straight on, and here it is outside in your backyard, simply praying to be looked at."

"I haven't much time, Andrew," said Mrs. Marriott, fast succumbing to anything that promised to break the monotony of life, yet holding weakly to the remnants of her first determination. "Mind, I don't intend to buy anything," she said, as she followed him to the cart stored with silks and ribbons, lace and linen—so necessary to every woman's existence, be she in city or country. To many isolated homes where shops were inaccessible luxuries, old Andrew du Longueville's cart was a veritable storehouse of delight. Workworn women would throng about it with eyes glistening in anticipation, while "Belle Mahone" would receive affectionate rubs along her white nose and perhaps a lump of brown sugar or a chunk of sweet gramma to nibble. On such occasions,

when in the midst of some half dozen or so of these appreciative, hard-worked mothers and daughters of the soil, old Andrew would feel himself a king surrounded by an admiring court. The immediate prospect of ready cash and a comfortable profit on his merchandise lent a nimbleness to otherwise stiff fingers, and the "Ohs" and the "Ahs" that greeted each fresh roll were balm to a weary soul. For Andrew felt that fortune had treated him hardly. Was he not, by right of birth, Count of Longueville, in the country of Bordeaux? His ancestors had supped with kings, yet he, Andrew du Longueville, the last of a noble race, drove a tilted cart and sold cloth and ribbon. Peste! After such reflections the old man would swear softly in his mother tongue until "Belle Mahone," oblivious of her master's fallen estate, would stop to nibble at a wayside bush topped with young sweet leaves.

Not wishing to monopolize the pleasure of ransacking Andrew's cart, Mrs. Marriott glanced about her for her neice. Marion, her daughter, she knew would not come, for Marion, scorning her woman's form sought to model herself the best way she could after the sterner sex, whom she yet inconsistently affected to despise.

"Agnes," Mrs. Marriott's high, clear voice was slightly raised.

A dish of yellow, spice-scented quinces, half-peeled and standing on a rough table beneath a grape trellis, showed where Angnes had lately been. But as her aunt's voice rang through the kitchen garden and circled up the bare hill, no one answered her.

"I'm sure I don't know where she is," she said, turning to inspect Andrew's goods.

Lengths of fine material sprigged with delicate blossoms were spread out for her edification; one, a lawn, dotted here and there with a pale blue rose, seemed specially charming.

"This is very pretty, Andrew," she said, fingering it carefully and thinking it would suit Agnes.

"It's fit for a queen," answered Andrew, mindful of his true estate. "When my grandmother was forced to fly from France because she was a Huguenot," he began pompously, "she wore a gown similar in design to that. It is a beautiful material, madam."

"Did your grandmother keep the dress?" asked the old lady, curiously.

"Madam, I have it yet, locked in the very bottom of an iron chest, which also came with her. Le bon Dieu rest her soul!" Andrew was ready to launch forth into his family history again, but the sound of voices floating over the hill diverted his rambling reflections

"Quickly, Agnes; now stand here and hold out your skirts while I shoo him down."

It was Marion speaking, and glancing up, her mother saw she and Agnes running as though something abnormal was in full chase after them.

"There he goes," Agnes's voice stole faintly kitchenwards.

"Dear, dear!" cried her aunt, aghast. "What is the child doing? She will kill herself. I wonder she can run at all. Agnes, Agnes! I want you," she called shrilly.

Anges heard and came panting through the garden.

"He's gone," she gasped.

"Who's gone?" queried her aunt truculently.

"Peter," said Agnes, smiling suddenly as she recognized Andrew, and sinking into the stiff rocking chair beside the table.

"How do you do, Andrew?" she said, feeling all at once hot and tired. Her aunt had disappeared inside. "I didn't know you travelled this way, too, Andrew," she continued, the colour ebbing from her cheeks in the reaction after her violent exertions.

The old man regarded her approvingly, his black, sparkling eyes noting the delicate profile, the fine pencilled brows, and the wealth of sunlit hair. But before he could answer, Mrs. Marriott came hurrying out with a huge cream

shawl. She threw it round the girl's shoulders and tucked it about her feet.

"Don't ever go after Peter again," she scolded kindly. "Marion must be mad. You can't be too careful, child, after the sickness you have had."

"You have been ill?" said Andrew quickly.

The girl nodded, a tremulous smile about her lips. How ill, none but she herself knew.

"Thank you, Aunt Fanny," she murmured, leaning back against the hard old rocking chair.

"Have you met Andrew before?" asked her aunt, surprised.

"Why, yes," said Agnes. "I have often seen Andrew at Tarawingee and at home, haven't I, Andrew?"

"She speaks the truth," said Andrew, with becoming gravity.

"Well, well; to be sure," said Mrs. Marriott. "You must know half the countryside, Andrew. Here, show me that sprigged lawn again—the one with the blue flower. Now, how do you like that, Agnes?" holding it up.

"Aunt, it is beautiful," cried the girl. "And so delicate, isn't it?"

"Well, well; cut me off a dress length," said her aunt to Andrew. "There, it is for you," as Andrew unrolled the material and snipped off the requisite number of yards.

"For me, aunt! You are too good. But, thank you, dear. I do appreciate it. I have never had so fine a material in my life."

Aunt Fanny's eyes snapped with pleasure. She dearly loved to give a present and she dearly loved to receive due appreciation for the gift, whatsoever it might be. Knowing this, Agnes pulled her down beside her and kissed the silvered hair, once, twice, thrice. "What an old dear you are," she said, softly.

A tall, thin figure came slowly through the kitchen garden, a great Persian cat pinioned firmly under one arm.

"Marion, is that you?" cried Mrs. Marriott.

"I believe so," answered her daughter abruptly, pushing a man's felt cap back from her forehead.

"What have you been doing to Agnes?" said her mother, exasperation in her voice.

"Nothing," said Marion shortly.

"Oh, did you catch him?" cried Agnes, gazing at the great black cat. "Peter," she called, "What a dance you led us! How did you catch him, Marion?"

"He got caught in the wire fence," said Marion, rubbing her pet's ears and looking with amused tolerance at Andrew du Longueville. "Have you brought fine silks for me, Andrew?" she asked, mockingly.

But the old man pretended to be searching in his cart. "Ah, here it is," he exclaimed, drawing forth a fat roll of rich purple silk. "Is it not gorgeous, madam?" turning to Mrs. Marriott.

"It is indeed," said Marion, moving towards the house. "Mother, be sure and buy me a length." There was a faint sneer about her lips as she went.

Agnes glanced reproachfully at her, but her mother did not notice anything unusual. Marion was always like that; her cats and her vegetable garden were the only things she appeared to have any affection for; her mother received but a scanty pittance.

The purple silk unfolded, Mrs. Marriott bent over it delightedly, feeling its quality, testing its stoutness.

"Andrew," she said presently, "this is the best roll of silk you have ever brought round."

"It is," agreed the old man, "and it would suit you, madam, to perfection. You would appear charming in it. You would make eyes to glisten."

Andrew had certainly inherited his forbears' gift of compliment.

"Fie! Fie! Andrew. An old lady like me!"

Agnes laughed merrily at her aunt's confusion.

"I've a great weakness for purple," said Aunt Fanny. "Yet, you know, Agnes, that other silk

is fairly good yet," her eyebrows raised questioningly at her niece.

"But, as Andrew says, purple would suit you perfectly," said Agnes, helping to weaken her aunt's firm resolution. "And then it would be so appropriate to wear on the Queen's birthday," continued Agnes, touching a vulnerable spot. Her aunt's loyalty was very great and this allusion to the Queen proved her further undoing.

"I'll take it," she said.

"What! the roll?" said Andrew quickly, seeing business ahead.

"No, no man; what do you take me for—a giantess? Twenty yards will do. I shall have it very full," she confided in an aside to her niece, "with a fluting of good lace about the collar and cuffs and a panel of fine black lace up the side. What do you think, Agnes?"

"Charming," said the girl, drawing the dish of quinces nearer and commencing to peel one.

The sight of Andrew and his tilted cart awakened memories. One short year and her dreams to vanish so. Were the pomegranates budding along the old grey fence, and the roses, pink and red, flowering gaily? Did the leaves of the plum trees whisper ever so softly beside the babbling creek, and the doves still murmur in the pines? Ah! the ache of it all; the dull pain for

ever gnawing at her heart, waking her even in the night when the stars were peeping coldly in at her window and the water sang sleepily on the flat mud shores of the lake. Would they dance again this year at Tarawingee? Would the long room be garnished and polished for the guests? Would they have the same musician? Would they—Agnes broke away from her memories, peeling the quinces so hurriedly and nervously that the knife slipped and cut her finger. But she wrapped her handkerchief about it and went inside to the kitchen.

As usual, Andrew would stay for dinner. "Belle Mahone," impatiently jingling her bit, was unmistakably begging a lump of sugar. Agnes went to a round black tin, selected a lump and took it out. "Belle Mahone" swallowed it greedily, soft oozy drops falling from her mouth to the ground.

While Andrew packed his disordered cart and liberated his faithful "Belle," Agnes set the cloth on the kitchen table, took down the large glass cruet from the shelf behind the door, and filled a jug with ale from the stone jar in the corner.

Hat in hand, Andrew came and stood awkwardly at the door.

"Come in," said Aunt Fanny, hospitably. "There's only stew and pumpkin pie to-day, Andrew, and a roly-poly for pudding."

Andrew slipped into the chair awaiting him.

Mrs. Marriott went in search of her forgotten dish of peas, but Agnes stayed in the warm kitchen. Perchance Andrew would give her some news.

"It's wonderful the people I see in my travels," he began as though in answer to her thought. "Now, only last week I was over Wilton way—went up past Tarawingee right to the mountains. Sold everything clean out."

"And how were they at Tarawingee?" asked Agnes from her seat on the old-fashioned settee.

"Madam was preserving fruit," said Andrew. "Plums, peaches, apricots—everything in the orchard. They say the vintage this year will be the heaviest ever known."

Agnes did not answer.

Andrew continued: "Madam's husband will be standing for Parliament soon."

"Indeed," said the girl. "How does he find time for that?"

"A rich man has plenty of time," quoth Andrew, wisely.

"But he is such a busy one, Andrew."

"You speak the truth," agreed the old man, bending his black eyes in the direction of the settee, and noting the flushed cheeks and busy fingers. "There was a young lady staying there," he said, mentally noting the fact for the

thousandth time that the person was yet to be discovered who could excel his wife in making stews.

"Was she short or fair?" asked Agnes, thinking of little Mavis White.

"No," said Andrew, "she was tall and had hair bright as the sun."

"Oh!" said Agnes, a queer numbness stealing through her fingers so that the quince she peeled carefully, on account of her cut finger, fell clumsily to the floor and rolled under Andrew's chair. He stooped stiffly and handed it back to her.

"It must have been Miss Parry," she said bravely, taking the quince again.

"That's so," said the old man, in his raspy nasal voice. "That's her very name—hair like the sun she had, but eyes"—Andrew paused, seeking a fitting simile—"green as a shallow sea."

His spoon sank into the roly-poly, and Agnes peeled the quince silently.

Someone stood suddenly at the door, his long, meagre shadow slanting across the kitchen floor.

For an instant Agnes thought she dreamed. Did anyone but Sol Gosling possess such a long crooked nose veering in a south-easterly direction, above a wide thin mouth which smiled in a queer twisted fashion of its own, while one eye

squinted furtively as though winking at some mysterious joke.

"D'you do,' said Sol, gravely doffing his wide-brimmed hat.

Agnes left her quinces. "Why Sol," she said. pleasure at the unexpected sight of a familiar figure brightening her eyes. "How come you this way? You are about the last person I should have thought to see."

"Jest what I was thinkin' of yerself, miss," said Sol. "Had no idee who I'd see when I come to the door. I be jest come to beg a can o' hot water for a pot o' tea. I'm sort o' scourin' the country for a white-faced chestnut colt."

Andrew gazed long at Sol. "I've seen you afore," he remarked, burying his nose in the jug of ale.

Sol transferred his attention to him. "I guessed I knowed the old forelegs in the yard," he answered, squinting hard. "All the lydies are dyin' to see yer agin—clo'es all wore out since yer last trip."

Andrew scented sarcasm, and a cunning smile played beneath his long white beard. "That so?" he queried guardedly. "I must jog along, then. Time flies, and 'Belle Mahone' has finished her corn. Good day, miss."

He pulled his forelock by way of farewell to Agnes, and bowed low as he did so.

"Come in, Sol," said Agnes, amused at Andrew's adieu. "I'll run and ask Aunt Fanny to let you have your dinner here."

Protesting sheepishly, Sol came in, while Andrew hitched the piebald nag to the cart, and, with a backward glance towards the figure seated on the settee, rumbled out of the yard and disappeared round the corner of the house. He kept his gravity until the bottom of the hill was reached, then "Belle Mahone" was surprised to hear a series of wicked chuckles rising in rapid crescendo until they broke into loud guffaws of unsuppressed mirth.

"To think on it," murmured Andrew to himself, as his keen eyes roved to the distant line of forest. "A fool travels far," he told "Belle Mahone" as they jogged along the road circling the mud shores of the lake.

CHAPTER XV

Introduces Dark Ben

IN the afternoon, with the sunlight falling in great shafts over its wide heaving breast, the lake seemed very beautiful. Gulls skimmed across it; sometimes a black shag rose and dipped between the smooth long rollers; often a flock of divers went sailing two by two, in their measured stately manner, low against the water.

Agnes put her hat on and went down the hill. Aunt Fanny was busy making up her newly-acquired purple silk. Marion was working in her vegetable garden. There was nothing at all for Agnes to do, and the outside world was calling—calling. Waves were lisping to the trees; gulls were screaming with delight; across the lake came the low murmur of the wind; even the old cockatoo in front of Dark Ben's cottage flapped his wings and lifted his voice in a strange sing-song. Smoke from numberless fisher folks' cottages went up in a straight, blue column heavenward; the walls of the low buildings were dark blots of amber against the pale

ochre of the mud shores. Some stood higher, wild honeysuckle screening their doors; a stunted gum or two for the background.

Towards one of these Agnes bent her steps. Zillah, Dark Ben's daughter, would perhaps bake to-day, and would only be too glad for a visitor to drop in to taste and praise her wonderful home-made biscuits.

The cockatoo greeted her appearance with a loud screech. "You'll soon be in Davy's locker," he told her, his head on one side.

"I hope not," said the girl, laughing and knocking at the open door.

Seeing Agnes, Ben called in a deep rumbling voice, "Walk in, miss; walk in. Zillah'll be right glad to see yer. She's been bakin' to-day."

Agnes entered the low-ceiled cottage. Cocky murmuring persistently in a chuckling monotone, "You'll soon be in Davy's locker!"

"Hold your tongue," scolded the old man.

"Soon be in Davy's locker," whispered the bird.

"I'll wring yer neck yet," said Dark Ben, shaking a threatening fist. Cocky subsided at this dire threat of vengeance, and the old man poked the fire with a short shovel and called: "Zillah! Here be a visitor to see yer."

A door opened, and an angular, grey-haired

woman came in. Seeing Agnes sitting in the rocker, which was adorned with a woollen antimacassar of hideous design, she smiled in a strange set manner, and remarked in a peculiarly soft voice: "I be real glad to see you. The biscuits is extry nice to-day."

"I'm dreadfully hungry too," said Agnes, speaking gaily. "How fortunate I should come to-day."

"I'll lay the tea," said Zillah, taking the wondrous ornamental ship from the centre of the table and setting it carefully on the wooden safe. That ship was the pride of Dark Ben's heart. When in an unusually felicitious frame of mind he would gaze at it and murmur to himself: "Ain't she a booty! She be a real lady now." He watched his daughter's handling of it with jealous eyes. When it was safely deposited on the safe between the soapstone monkey and the quaint china vase modelled to the semblance of a fish, he heaved a sigh of relief, and turning to Agnes, said: "Heard ye the souls speaking last night?"

"The souls?" questioned the girl, wonderingly.

"Ay, the souls of those that are gone, come back on the wind," muttered Dark Ben, broodingly, his fierce eyes on the scarlet embers of the fire.

"There, there, father," said his daughter sooth-

ingly, as she opened the safe and lifted a delicate china tea service to the table.

Dark Ben bent a glance half menacing upon her. "You be a silent woman," he mumbled inaudibly. "There baint many o' your sort i' the world, Zillah."

"What's that, father?" questioned Zillah, catching the latter part of the sentence.

"Naught, Zillah, naught," he answered. "Where's my glass, Zillah?" irascibility uppermost in his voice.

Zillah went out to get it. For her own peace of mind she kept the keg of rum in a back room. The door blew to as she went out. With a chuckle Dark Ben glowered on Agnes. "There ain't many like my darter, miss," he remarked, removing the pipe from his mouth and spitting vehemently into the fire.

Agnes did not answer. The old man's visage, swarthy and repulsive, his red eyes glinting like two fierce sparks, fascinated, yet repelled her.

"Last night the souls spoke to me," said Dark Ben impressively, a stained finger on the bowl of his pipe as he pressed the tobacco.

An uncanny feeling stole over Agnes. Was the old man quite sane? She had heard strange tales in the village.

Dark Ben leaned confidentially across the arm of his chair. "They talked to me," he said, "and

told me all about it. Three years gone they did the same, and I listened," muttered Dark Ben. "Ay, I listened."

Zillah reappeared, a tumbler in her hand, and her father's gloomy thoughts gave way to the pleasure of anticipating his afternoon's snack. "You be a good girl, Zillah," he mumbled as he took the glass from her.

While Zillah and Agnes drank tea, the old man sipped his rum, glancing ever and anon at his daughter, a leer, strange and sinister, in his red, bleared eyes, a strangled chuckle half throttling him as he drank. "Ay, ay, she be a fine gal." he mumbled.

"Your father seems quite bright to-day," said Agnes, watching the old man curiously.

"He often gets like that at this time o' the year," answered Zillah, in her soft, slow voice.

"Ay, I be very skittish this time o' the year," agreed Dark Ben from his corner.

Agnes rose soon, saying she would stroll along the beach as far as the Dutchman's Nose, and see the sunset.

"You be able to see the 'Devil's rocks' from there," said Dark Ben, as she went out. "It's midway in the bay beyond. Mark how the water licks the sides, jest like a savage monster a-hungerin' for blood. 'Tis always like that," said the old man, gloomily. "Ay, but to hear the

wind talk round them rocks at night would make your hair stand on end and your flesh creep from its bones. I heard it once," he added thoughtfully. "But Dark Ben was never afeard, no, he wasn't afeard; he listened, Zillah, didn't he?"—turning to his daughter, who stood at the open door bidding good-bye to her visitor.

"Come, come; you be ower talkative to-day, father," said Zillah shortly, and shading her eyes from the sun so that she might see the slim white-clad figure moving quickly along the beach.

The "Dutchman's Nose" was a good half mile from Dark Ben's cottage. It stood out boldly from the shore, a narrow promontory of rocky soil, amber-tinted, but lighted here and there with straggling belts of wild honeysuckle. It guarded the mouth of the so-called lake. Beyond it one saw the deeper blue of the bay; beyond that the dull purple of the distant ocean. The sunlight struck the waters of the lake broadly, so that they shimmered like silk, caught the leaves of the honeysuckle edging the shore and burnished them to points of silver, fell back and kissed the sands so that each fine grain glistened and scintillated like white flame.

Agnes walked quickly, for the afternoon waned and the sun was fast whirling towards the west. The shadows were lengthening along

the shore as she reached the "Dutchman's Nose" and, walking to the other side, seated herself on the shelf of dried sea-weed that the tides had plundered from the ocean and carried hither. The sea-weed was soft and springy and pungent, with a salt tang. Tired after her walk, Agnes leaned against the ledge of rock and let her gaze wander across the bay to that distant line of deep purple. She was upset to-day. The unexpected appearance of Sol Gosling, perhaps, accounted for it. He had brought with him the atmosphere of Tarawingee. In her mind's eye Agnes saw the tall box trees behind the house, the acacias moving slowly in the afternoon sunlight. She could hear the chirping of birds in the aviary, the weird cries of the peacocks from the garden, the angry hiss of Cocky, and the bark of a tormenting pup. It seemed to stand before her more clearly even than her own home. Every nook and corner of Tarawingee was pregnant with memory. There was the narrow path winding beside the creek where the she-oaks whispered; there was the road sheltered with mahogany, wild apple and gum, where the moonlight filtered through moving leaves, falling in tiny silver patches upon the moist red earth, winging the horses' feet with magic, stirring the dreams and hopes of a hundred years into the space of one short hour.

Above all, there was the garden where the bees droned and the birds sang, where flowers bloomed and the blossoming plum trees screened a small vine-covered fernery. Here it was that her thoughts centred, and for the moment the sweetness of that dear morning came back to her, tinting the fair cheeks with delicate colour, widening the blue eyes, with a quick pulsing tenderness. After all, she would always have that memory. She must strive to keep it free from bitterness. There was another, too, wherein moonlight bathed the earth with pearl-blue lustre and stars winked curiously above a pomegranate hedge, where the strains of a waltz dreamed upon the night, and the soft sound of dancing feet gliding rhythmically upon a polished floor.

A sigh escaped the sweet lips. Was this a fisherman's boat stealing along the outer beach towards the lake? Midway in the bay the "Devil's Rocks" reared ugly, jagged fangs, for ever keeping the waves at bay, so that they leaped high in a fierce, white anger, growling in their futile efforts, but returning to the siege with a cruel insistence.

The small boat hugging the outer beach was fast drawing nearer. Agnes could see the fisherman rowing. She could even see the water feathering his blade and the name painted on the

bow. "The Sea Swallow," she murmured. "I don't remember seeing that name before. Perhaps it is a new boat."

The fisherman came towards the "Dutchman's Nose." A faint, sick feeling stole over the girl as she watched, her eyes dilated, and her breath came unevenly. She heard the grinding of the boat as it touched the bottom, saw the fisherman jump out and push it further up; then, fascinated, watched him come slowly across the shingle. A bush of honeysuckle hid Agnes from view. The girl scarcely recognised him. Face set and marred with an ugly sneer, it was Bertram Forbes coming towards her.

A mist fell across the sea as she waited. It was not until he rounded the intervening bush that he became aware of another's presence. Swift annoyance swept his features clear of other emotion.

"I beg your pardon," he began, then a great stillness settled upon him. The lapping of the tide upon the beach grew into a dull thunder, and the scream of a passing gull into a shrill unearthly shriek.

"Every day," said the man slowly, "I have come here and looked at the bare house on the hill where they told me you were staying. I have tried to imagine you coquette, flirt, wanton trifler of all the deep true things in a man's soul;

but I could not really make myself believe it. Tell me yourself, Agnes."

The lump in the girl's throat melted suddenly and a great anger possessed her. She laughed, and the sweetness of her voice had vanished, so that her mirth sounded hard and harsh.

"How conveniently some cast the blame of their own actions on others," she said, her lips curved to a cruel smile.

"I never trifled with you," said Forbes gently, coming nearer, the bronze of his face whitening with the effort of self-control. To snatch her in his arms and bear her away in his boat rose to an almost overmastering impulse. If she would but let him be tender with her, so that this wretched misunderstanding might vanish. "Agnes," he pleaded," tell me what I have done. so that I may make amends.

"You cannot do that," said the girl, coldly, "without still hurting another as you hurt me."

"God knows I never meant to hurt you, Agnes," he answered. "Why will you not tell me?"

Her eyes blazed. "Do you imagine, sir, that you can trifle with the affection of every girl you meet and go unscathed? To how many have you told your love? Yes, even when I held myself betrothed to you? Go back to her whom you love for the moment. I despise you unutterably.

Have you no sense of honour, that you speak to me thus when you are not even free to do so?"

The scorn of her words seared like a dull fire, but the scorn in her eyes was unbearable. Under it Forbes' face grew scarlet, and his hands trembled as with ague.

She knew then about Myrtle Parry; knew too, that he was engaged to her. He had hoped that she might not. In his heart he had hoped that time would turn a little way and take him back to that day when he stood beneath a pink-capped peach tree and watched the sunset through the shining leaves of the oranges, with a dear girl's trusting hand in his, the glory of the sun in her eyes and on her hair. He was a man—could she not understand?

Agnes watched him go—saw the boat shoot out into the water—saw him jump in and lift his oars; but she refused to see his hat raised in farewell or the love battling with anger in his eyes. "I hate him, hate him," she whispered to the honeysuckle. "In a year he would have tired of me; would have flung me aside to eat out my heart with neglect." Her voice broke suddenly, tears wetting the lashes resting on her cheeks.

Across the bay the sun slipped nearer the horizon, his rays mounting to the zenith on mighty ladders. The boat edging along the

outer beach, grew fainter and smaller with every second until it seemed to disappear in the molten glory of the setting sun.

A chill wind fanned through the honeysuckles as she hurried back. How long the way seemed, and how tired she was. No, she must not cry. Her pride and strength of will must help her bear this burden. How ill he had looked. But, ah! how she despised him. She would not give her children a father with so little sense of honour.

The visitor sitting near the doorway of Dark Ben's cottage saw her pass; saw the white strained face, the set lips, and nervous limbs, and, turning to Dark Ben, he asked: "Did you say Miss Wiseman went on to the "Dutchman's Nose?"

"Ay, Zillah did," said Dark Ben, cheerfully.

. . . . . .

As Agnes went up the steps to the verandah her aunt met her at the top.

"I never guessed he would come," she said. "How should I, when he didn't even send word and hasn't written for years."

"Who do you mean?" asked the girl hurriedly. She hoped her aunt would not notice anything unusual in her appearance, but it was hard to appear just the same.

"He went down to the beach," continued Aunt Fanny. "Didn't you see him, Agnes? He and Dark Ben are great friends. I thought he would find you there—in fact, I told him he would."

"Whoever do you mean, Aunt Fanny?" said Agnes, sinking into a chair.

"Why, Guy Antrobus, of course," answered her aunt in surprise. "Who else should I mean. Have you never seen him, Agnes?"

"Yes, yes," said Agnes, hurriedly. "Of course, I remember now."

Guy Antrobus had married Aunt Fanny's eldest daughter, but she had died soon after.

She went wearily upstairs, hoping that he would not stay long. The burden of entertaining would probably fall to her lot, as Marion had never made any pretence of liking her brother-in-law. But though they waited tea for him, Guy Antrobus did not come.

"No doubt he has stayed down at Dark Ben's," said Aunt Fanny, disappointedly. "I told him we had nothing here for tea, but I forgot about the white rooster, and I killed and roasted it as a surprise after he had gone out. Never mind, it will be just as nice cold."

Marion sniffed. "Trust Guy Antrobus to look after his stomach," she said, caustically, placing a saucer of milk on the floor for one of her pets.

"Marion," said her mother, "how often have I told you not to feed those wretched cats in here?"

Marion took no notice. "If Guy Antrobus did it,' she remarked presently, picking up the empty saucer, "you wouldn't say a word; why worry me over it?"

Her mother did not answer and tea ended rather abruptly.

Down at Dark Ben's the visitor was safely ensconced in a corner of the fireplace opposite the old man. Zillah was crochetting an antimacassar. The stiff rocking chair rocked to the tune of her thoughts. Sometimes it creaked back and forth, slowly, as if languid with old age, then it would move faster and faster, until Zillah's steel needles caught the glow of the embers and shone with a lustrous brilliance. Guy Antrobus glanced round the room. In the ruddy firelight it looked grotesque yet picturesque. The ship sailed gallantly over the table, the soapstone monkey grinned on the safe, a white rose hung its weary head from the wide mouth of the china fish, and over the safe a great albatross stretched its wings from corner to corner of the room.

"Where did you say you shot that albatross, Ben?" asked the visitor, his eyes on the glass eyes of the dead bird.

Ben glanced proudly at his trophy. "I nigh forget, myself," he said, "but I think 'twas midway in the Indian Ocean on the frigate 'Despair.'"

"What was the frigate's proper name?" asked Antrobus, willing to hear all Ben's old yarns over again.

"She'd bin christianed 'The Lady Charlotte,'" said Ben, launching forth, "but when the mainmast played us false by snapping off and the rudder run away in the storm, why, we christianed her the 'Despair.' And there we was adriftin' for days and weeks with our tongues ashrivellin' up for a drop o' water, and when we seen that albatross circling overhead we thirsted for his blood, just even one drop," continued Ben, warming to his subject. "They all tried, but I shot him, that's why his carcase is here," pointing towards the bird with a grimy, tobacco-stained thumb. "Zillah, she be sooperstitious about it; but only for that bird, I tell her, she wouldn't 'a' had a father."

"What is it's length from wing to wing?" questioned the visitor.

"It be nine feet across from the tip of one wing to t'other," said Dark Ben, proudly. "But we didn't wait to weigh it; we sucked it there and then where it fell on the deck, and that night we sighted the Frenchies."

The old man almost quenched the fire with a mighty sneeze. He poked it up again with the toe of his boot. "And on French soil I met Zillah's mother, and here Zillah be, and here I be; but poor Louise be in her grave over the hill yonder," pointing uncertainly towards the east. "And poor George——" Dark Ben broke off abruptly.

"How did George come to get drowned?" asked Antrobus presently, the smoke from his pipe curling up the chimney.

There was silence in the room. Zillah crochetted industriously, one eye on her father, the other on her needle. Dark Ben spat into the fire.

"It was a haccident," he muttered.

"Poor George," said the visitor, reminiscently. "He was a good son to you, but it is always the best swimmers that go, strange to say."

"It was this way," muttered the old man, moving restlessly in his chair. "George and a pal went to fish off 'Devil's Rocks.' Ay, I'll be keerful," motioning his daughter back as she rose suddenly and walked across the room. "And they fished there all night," said Dark Ben, gloomily, "and in the mornin' they never come back." He bent his small red eyes on the visitor. "But the Portuguese come back," he

said slowly, his voice changing to a soft, quiet drawl like his daughter's.

"Who was the Portuguese, Ben?" Interest deepened the visitor's voice.

Why did Zillah seem perturbed and Dark Ben look so strange?

"Why, a friend, o' course," said Dark Ben. "A friend who, it seems, was a-fishin' off the other side o' the Rocks. And in the morning the Portuguese come back in his boat and said as how George and his pal was drownded."

The old man paused, and the falling of the cinders and soft disintegrating of hot embers became the only sound in the room.

"And after that?" said Antrobus, quickly.

"Why?" drawled Dark Ben, "after that the curious thing was that the Portuguese was drownded too."

In spite of the fire, the room suddenly grew cold to Guy Antrobus.

Zillah moved restlessly in her chair, and the glass eyes of the dead albatross seemed almost life-like where the firelight caught and gleamed in them.

When Antrobus had gone, a third visitor knocked at the door of Dark Ben's cottage. Before she opened it, Zillah hastily blew the candles out.

CHAPTER XVI

Wherein Agnes Finds Comfort

THE lake seemed a great hollowed bowl of beaten silver. Each boat rocking near the long, low jetties was touched with the magic finger of the moon. The same magic caressed the mud shores, and, stealing further, glistened on the sand, fell here and there in patches among the stunted trees and bathed the bare hill where Aunt Fanny's house stood. It was late. The tall grandfather clock in the hall downstairs had proclaimed it eleven o'clock some time ago, yet Agnes could not sleep. In desperation she had thrown her woollen wrapper about her, and winding a scarf of silver tissue about her head had stolen on to the balcony. Her eyes were wide and unmistakably brilliant, and as she stared across the lake all the glory of the moon seemed to centre in them, until they changed to gleaming sapphires. Why was the night so long and dreary? Was that the wind pulsing through the distant forest? She bent her head and listened. What a horrid ghostly sound it was. How often she had

heard it murmur in the same deep, slow hush through the willows and ironwoods at home. The rising tide was breaking fitfully on shining mud and gleaming sand, and far, far away, the call of a lonely bittern mingled with the scream of the curlews. Would the world ever grow sweet again? she wondered. Would the sparkle return to the sun and dear dreams people the moonlight? Would song echo on the wind, and the flowers and the woodland sing?

From the hammock at the other end of the verandah, half screened by the bamboo blind, someone watched unseen. Guy Antrobus, too, had been unable to sleep. This old house, the grey lake filling the night with its insistent murmur, the boats rocking carelessly beside the jetties; all, all took him back to the days of his young manhood. Nothing had changed much, except that Dark Ben had grown more gruesome with old age.

In this forgotten spot the arm of the law held but poor sway. Folk did as they liked, taking revenge, righting wrongs as the mood seized them, while beyond the hills the outer world stepped by unheeded. And over it all the spirit of his dead wife hovered. As of old her voice echoed through the house, her face smiled from the corners, her photograph still hung on the walls, and in the room downstairs, a little cabinet

stood holding some of her books and music. And, as when she had gone, the same dull pain came back to the man's heart, tightening his lips, filling the kind, grey eyes with deep, unspoken sadness. The girl brooding so silently in the moonlight seemed too young to have tasted sadness, yet the man watching, read the signs, for had he not passed that way?

Mrs. Marriott had said she had been ill. Had she meant ill in mind or body? Generally they went hand in hand, but the body mended far more quickly than the mind. Time only could re-tune the unstrung jangled soul to perfect harmony; sometimes a little discord lingered to the end of time.

Should he go and comfort? If his own wee daughter had lived would she not have been as old as this, perchance in trouble too, needing help, comfort, strength to ease the burden. Guy Antrobus rose quietly and drew aside the bamboo screen. As he came down the balcony Agnes recognized him, yet she did not move or speak. She saw only a grey-haired man clad in a silver-grey suit, and in the plain black tie a small pearl-pin twinkled where the moon shone on it.

He took her hand gently, holding it in his own, then "This moonlight banishes sleep, doesn't it?"

he said, looking earnestly into the wide blue eyes.

"Yes," she answered, drawing the silver tissue closer about her head. Beneath it he saw the glint of her golden hair.

It did not seem strange to Agnes that he should come to her like this. She had always known what he must be like; no eyes could be kinder, no voice more gentle or filled with such a deep undercurrent of music.

Suddenly long suppressed tears refused to be quenched; they rose and rimmed her eyes, edging her lashes with a row of glinting diamonds, falling slowly one by one to the delicately-veined hand holding so bravely to the balustrade.

With a quick, warm pressure his hand closed over hers. "Little girl," he whispered, "long ago I travelled the same hard road that you are passing down. Will you not tell a friend, who is old enough to be your father, what the trouble is?"

She could not see him for the tremulous mist before her eyes; but, as though instinctively, her hands nestled back into the warm hollow of his and stayed there.

"Many years go," said Guy Antrobus, gently, "a maid and a boy found life's happiness in this old house, and the beach and the lake became enchanted places. All life stretched before

them, joyous and filled with love. They gazed into the future blindly, not knowing what awaited them. And the maid went away with the boy to the dear new home, where the forest rose behind in a dark green wall, and in front a vast sea of grain waved."

Guy Antrobus paused, and Agnes thought his voice shook a little as he continued: "A year after, the little maid lay dead in the white room overlooking the sea of wheat, and in her arms she held a wee miniature of herself. That night," said the man gently, for the telling of it still hurt, "as the boy knelt by their side, a great fire suddenly lit the sky and shone upon those silent sleepers. In the morning, the wheat, too, had gone—the world was a blackened waste, dreary and desolate. Love and fortune had flown on the silent wings of the night, leaving the man stricken to the soul."

The weird cries of the curlews sounded harsh and far away, and still Agnes could not speak.

He bent nearer to her. "Does your trouble hurt like the boy's hurt?" he asked, his eyes probing the white strained face.

"Nearly," she whispered at last, the comfort of his caressing fingers bringing back her self-control.

"Life seems so cruel and relentless, doesn't it?" he said. "And all its wonderful magic can

die on one short second. But, little girl, be brave and you will find that fairy fingers can paint again, that the old songs will fill your heart, and dreams, just as dear, take the place of those that have vanished."

Like lustrous moon-jewels her eyes wandered across the lake, and gradually the comfort of his understanding filled her heart so that the dull ache lessened unconsciously and the cries of the distant curlews grew less harsh.

CHAPTER XVII

The Bush Fire

ANNETTE ate her porridge quickly. Mrs. Pritchard had had a bad turn the previous day, and Annette was anxious to go and inquire if she were any better. Only her father and Gilbert were at the breakfast table. Her mother was not yet up. Gilbert was grumbling at Katrin for having cooked the eggs too hard and frizzled the meat to a cinder. Lewis Wiseman was reading a letter. When he had finished it he got up from his chair and shouted at Gilbert: "Why wasn't this letter given to me last night? Where's your mother, Annette? Not up?"

"She's got a headache," said the little girl, soberly. "You mustn't disturb her."

"This letter is most important,' stormed Lewis Wiseman, directing his ire at his second son. "The mail came last night. You brought it yourself, yet you didn't bother to give me this letter." His voice somewhat resembled the bellow of an angry bull, and as he stamped about the room his face grew heated with excitement.

"Run and tell your mother I must see her," he told Annette, who was frowning at her empty porridge plate.

Gilbert's grumbling had given way to an angry silence.

"Why didn't you bring me this letter, sir?" cried his irate parent.

"You were down in the cellar when I came home," mumbled Gilbert, "and you told us not to disturb you when you were there."

"Fiddlesticks! I was only making an ointment guaranteed to kill any kind of mosquito. I could have left it half a second if you'd only dropped the letter down. Yet you were too lazy to do that! And why isn't the four-acre paddock ploughed?"—a fresh grievance rising to life as his gaze wandered out the open door to the flats. "The place is overgrown with thistles and cape-weed. Why in the name of all the saints don't you do something, instead of falling in love with every girl in the countryside?"

Gilbert rose awkwardly and left the room, Outside, his face whitened and a tense, hard expression grew about the young fellow's mouth. How much longer could he hold out? To break stones on the road would be a far happier existence than the one dragged out here. Hang the letter! He wished he had burnt it. As he walked towards the stable where Hal was fasten-

ing a knapsack to the pommel of Swagman's saddle, preparatory to a week's hard graft on his selection, he muttered, still fiercely rebellious. "Remember the little mother." But sometimes it required a lot of remembering when deep resentment burned heart and mind, when all around him life and opportunity were passing by without even allowing him to grasp his rightful share. Some day the chain would chafe too much, and then—Gilbert's eyes unconsciously brightened, and he was even whistling when he reached Hal.

"What's the row about?" enquired Hal, genially, as he tightened a buckle.

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. "A letter," he said. "Lord knows what's in it, but it seems to have disturbed the elements considerably."

Hal laughed. "You take things too seriously, old chap," his eyes on Gilbert's face.

"I'm the scapegoat," blurted Gilbert fiercely, "but I shan't put up with it much longer, Hal. It's past bearing."

Hal was silent. He knew too well all that his brother went through. But for the sake of the little mother, the brothers had agreed to give up their youthful hopes and plans of leaving the old home and starting life together in some other part of the country.

Always their eyes turned longingly to the

north, to Queensland—that land of delight, where wealth and prosperity seemed to emanate from the soil like magic mist evoked by some witch's wand.

"I'm desperate," said Gilbert. "I'll find a way out even if I have to take to bushranging Hang the four-acre paddock! I wish it would sink to the bottom of the sea." His eyes rested resentfully on the flats.

"By the way, did you hear that some desperadoes have burnt old Bill Dolphin's barn and hayshed?" said Hal adroitly.

"No," said Gilbert, forgetting his own woes. "When was it done and who is suspected?"

"The police are sure that there is some band of lawless fellows in the hills. This is not the first offence of the kind, and it seems that people in that district have been losing cattle and horses quite frequently the last ten months or so. I only hope they don't cross the range and rob these parts," he added, anxiously. "If they came and bailed me up in my shanty, I'd have a poor show Hullo, here's the news," as a voice bellowed from the verandah.

Lewis Wiseman was waving imperiously with his wide cabbage-tree hat. "What do you think?" he shouted. "Come down, I don't want the whole country-side to hear. Not just yet, at all events."

The old gentleman scanned the distant paddocks, the river flats, and the rounded Sugar-loaf not far away. Certainly only the birds of the air, and the cattle grazing in the paddocks would be able to hear; but there was no knowing who might be lurking in the willows along the river's bank, surreptitiously fishing, or perhaps someone might be stealthily hunting within range of his stentorian voice.

Gilbert slipped into the stable. "You go," he said to Hal.

As Hal approached the verandah he could see that some exciting news was seething for utterance.

"What d'you think," said his father, ramming the cabbage-tree hat farther over one ear.

"No idea," said Hal, hitching Swagman to a post.

"God bless me! Can't you give a guess?" said his father impatiently.

"Marion is to be married," said Hal, laughing.

"Not far out," said his father. "Only it's Agnes, the hussy, instead of Marion."

"Agnes!" said Hal abruptly, then "Who is it?"

"Guy Antrobus," replied his father, showing the letter and offering it to Hal for perusal.

Guy Antrobus' letter was brief, but to the point, and as Hal read it a certain wistfulness

came into his eyes. He handed it back without speaking.

"Well," said his father, "what do you think of it? Certainly he's old enough, and he's been married before; but if Agnes don't mind, it's all right, I suppose, and he's got a fine place in Queensland." He mopped his face thoughtfully with the handkerchief Annette had hemmed for him. "You know, he's done well since he gave up trying to grow wheat down south."

"I think Agnes will be happy," said Hal. slowly. "What does mother say?"

"Like all women she's worrying over the wedding and what she'll do when Agnes has gone. But I tell her time will show, and not to fidget over it now."

Lewis Wiseman tucked the letter into his waistcoat pocket and sneezed into the red cotton handkerchief. "How long will you be at the selection?" he asked, as Hal went in to bid goodbye to his mother.

"A week," he answered. "I must keep a lookout for the fire heading from the Blacksoil, and there's some ring-barking to do too."

In the plain little room with its wooden chintz-canopied bed, he found his mother sitting in front of the window, her beautiful eyes on the landscape without. Was it possible she could

see with some inner power? Hal often wondered. Turning to him, she said: "I know how glorious it is with the hills dipping to the south, the clean sweep of forest towards the west, the great clouds like giants in the sky and the glory of the colour and sunshine over it all. Is it not so, dear son?" holding his hand within her own.

"You have described it exactly, dear mother," he answered cheerily. "I think you must have some wizardry about you. It looks just as though the gods were playing football up there with the clouds."

"I knew, I knew,' said his mother, happily. "And what do you think about Agnes, Hal? Are you not a little surprised?"

"Just a little," said Hal. "I thought it would be someone else."

"That was broken off, dear; but don't tell your father. It would annoy him so," said Mrs. Wiseman gently, wondering whether or not Hal had ever guessed.

"I am glad," he answered quickly. "Agnes did not tell me, but I had my suspicions, you know. I am glad she discovered his shallowness in time."

"Yes, my son; but the awakening is always cruel," said his mother, gently.

It was an exceptionally cool day for February

as Hal left the home paddocks and, slipping the rails back into their sockets, mounted Swagman and rode towards the broken circle of hills standing like deep blue jewels beyond the barren Sugarloaf, which guarded the northern portion of Bungay. Along the edge of the range a thin haze of smoke crept stealthily, held in leash by a contrary wind. In the valleys blue melted into a deeper tinge, so that amethyst mingled with turquoise, sapphire and indigo; all blended with that soft mysterious film Nature so defty draws over her fairest pictures, shielding them, as it were, from the too garish light of the sun. The roads were white with dust. It rose thickly, whitening Hal's boots and dulling Swagman's glossy coat. Just ahead a teamster drove his waggon, his great whip whirling cruelly over his bullocks' patient heads, the air sulphurous with threats and doubtful encouragement. So engrossed was the man with his team that he had no time to return Hal's roadside greeting, and with a spurt, Swagman shot quickly ahead, glad to leave the slow, awkward cavalcade in the rear.

Past small wayside homes—poverty-stricken and bare—Hal rode. As he passed there was always a shout of approval from the children swarming on the fences. Urchins, dirty-faced but cheerful, waved decrepit hats or called after him, their mothers hovering somewhere in the

background ready to bid the young fellow "good-day" should he glance past the children and see them standing there in the dimness of the doorways.

As each mile drew Hal nearer those silent hills the farther away from them travelled his thoughts. In how many years could he honourably ask any girl to be his wife? Drudgery, elemental and stern, stared him in the face, baffling and heart-sickening. He must wrestle with the piece of land allotted to him out of all the acres and acres of well-nigh impenetrable bush, and even when this was done, what lay before him? Nothing—nothing that he could ask any girl to share with him—at least, not the little frail golden-haired girl whose portrait rose so vividly before him. It would kill her, crush the very life from the slender body and leave him with only the ghost of a memory and dull heartache. Hal roused himself and laughed, but the laugh was not very mirthful. It was not even safe to contemplate such things. It had required great self-control to refuse Tarawingee's invitation to the vintage ball that year. He must guard his tongue well lest it grew treacherous.

The hills watching him hid their smiles in the depths of the valleys, and schemed to further block this interfering mortal from forcing them to yield the secrets of their garnered wealth.

Along the edge of the range the blue haze wandered restlessly and, seeing it, the Spirit of the Hills laughed aloud, its wicked glee frightening the shy animals screened in the underbrush, waking sleepy opossums, scattering the birds along the mountain side, the sheen of their wings making splashes of colour among the emerald of forest leaves, the music of their sudden song the wonder of some mighty organ. The song of the birds floated across the lesser hills, passed on, and circled above the crest of the Sugarloaf, sank lower and reached the ears of Hal Wiseman, so that bleak care shrank back afraid and vanished altogether when a sweet uneven tenor suddenly joined the birds in their roundelay. It was only the last verse of an old song that the same golden-haired little girl had sung in the twilight a year ago. Yet how powerful the small things of life are! It sent hope and courage to a man's heart, and with its delicate harmony made beautiful the years to come, so that they stepped forth like shy maidens dancing a sweet old-fashioned minuet.

That day the ring of an axe, echoing from valley to valley, across one spur to another proved how busily Hal Wiseman worked. Giants of the forest were pushed aside, some fell, others were left to bleed and wither, their mighty arms stretched out in mute protest

against the law of man. Saplings, young, slender, obstreperous, were likewise treated; great vines were cut asunder, their severed parts swinging back in helpless anger, their leaves already beginning to wilt under the sun's fierce glare. And ever the hills watched, a laugh hidden in their depths. Now and again a grey kangaroo came and stared solemnly at this man creature but the least movement sent it hopping quickly away. The wallaroos and the rock wallabies also came, and often a disturbed bear cried hideously from the branches of a thick box or leafy redgum. The pines and the mountain oaks held whispering dialogues and in their branches the bronze-wing pigeons, the parrots and the leather-heads listened and chattered louder and more volubly than before. Bandicoots and paddymelons hid behind lichen-covered rocks, bright eyes popping out of their heads with fear, sometimes a startled hare ran blindly from tree to tree scarce knowing what the danger was, while far beneath in the gully a crow cawed hoarsely, sounding its evil notes above the sweet chatter of the other birds.

Hal shouldered his axe and moved up the mountain-side. Rocks slid beneath his feet and rolled down the slope, gaining speed in their descent, twigs snapped and dead leaves rustled, lizards crept away between the boulders, and

soldier ants paused to investigate. Surprised, a bower-bird disappeared in a flurry, uttering low notes of disapproval. The wind was changing and a faint, hardly perceptible smell of smoke stole through the forest. Hal paused beneath an overhanging boulder. "I scarcely think that fire will spread much," he mused, listening to the harsh cry of a distant crow, yet sniffing the air with a bushman's keen knowledge. "The wind has certainly veered more this way," he added, moving on until the boulder lay beneath him, a flat broad spot of vandyke brown, flanked with the green leaves of creeping ferns and mosses. But before sunset the wind changed again and the smoke drifted to the west.

Alone in his rough slab hut Hal read a battered volume of "Don Quixote" until his candle guttered to the socket. Wearily he blew it out, and turning to his couch of chaff and corn bags, fell asleep. Outside, the soft footfall of nocturnal feet and the deep inquiring breath of unseen creatures proclaimed the vigilance of that vast mysterious bushland flanking the old slab hut on every side.

It was not until the fourth day that Hal passed the tiny log hut built on the cap of the mountain. Keeping time to a blithe whistle young Tim was wielding a dangerous-looking tomahawk, while Camelia Violet, his baby sister,

played with her doll—a short, smooth block of tallow-wood, tied about the middle with a length of scarlet flannel. At the side of the house a woman was washing, and as Hal came up the sound of her voice floated down in a sort of raspy sing-song. It was an old, old nursery rhyme that she sang, and the baby dropped her improvised doll and listened happily, trying to imitate her mother's vocal efforts. Tim was the first to spy Hal, whereupon the woodland echoed with a glad "Hurrah! Here's Mr. Wiseman, mum."

"Mum" lifted a heated face from the steaming tubs, wrung her soap-sudded hands vigorously, and smiled at the young man as genially as her eldest-born Timothy.

"You be a sight for sore eyes," she said.

Hal laughed heartily, and stooping, swung baby Camelia high into the air. Perhaps it was his genuine love for little children that endeared Hal Wiseman to the hearts of all women. Rough, bush mothers adored him, society matrons regarded him approvingly, old ladies, high and low, looked upon him as a kind of Adonis, but more for his courtesy and kindly sympathy than for any special beauty. Nature had fashioned him rather ruggedly with a broad, high forehead, a pair of kind brown eyes, rather small than otherwise, a short snubbed nose, and

a wide, generous mouth set above an obstinate chin. To all children he was a demi-god, and a smile and a nod from him were treasured for years in many a bush-child's heart.

"Washing-day again, Mrs. Heineman?" he asked, gaily, as he duly admired Tim's new tomahawk.

"Seems to me it's always washin'-day for us women," answered Mrs. Heineman resignedly, plunging her arms into the tubs again. "Joe's gone to the settlement t'other side of the brush. We be out of everything almost. Weevils are in the flour something awful, and the sugar's that black and hard not even a bull-dog ant can nibble at it."

"Baby looks well on it all the same," said Hal, laughing.

"Oh, yes, she does well," said the mother, soberly. "The father and the boy fair worship her. But I'm troubled about Tim. He coughs something cruel in the night."

Tim, a lithe, thin ragamuffin, narrow-chested and somewhat rheumy-eyed, smiled sheepishly at his hero and murmured with a boy's nonchalance, "I be all right, it's only the hiccough."

"Hiccough, indeed!" said his mother. "It's a regular bark, sir, and no less."

Tim laughed. "I heerd a native dawg bark in the night. He was answerin' me, I think."

"There, there, doan't you be foolish," said his mother impatiently, an anxious furrow lining her forehead.

"Have you any idea how that fire started on the Razorback?" asked Hal, as he put baby Camelia down and gazed thoughtfully over the valley to that misty, violet-tinted range a little westward, which seemed to be hidden with a thicker haze than yesterday.

It was hot with the heat of February and a tiny mischievous wind was curling the leaves of the gums and turpentines.

"No idea," answered Mrs. Heineman, shaking her head. "Joe fancied it must a' started itself; that's the only solution he had. But—" diverging with a womanly inconsequence from the sterner probabilities of life—"come along and I'll show you what Joe calls my 'obby."

Mrs. Heineman once more wrung her hands and led the way to the front room, Timothy and the baby following. "You'd never guess what it be," she said, her face wreathed in smiles.

"I'm afraid I'm not good at guessing, Mrs. Heineman," he answered.

Mrs. Heineman lifted a thick exercise book from the middle table and opened it carefully. "Keep back, Tim," she scolded, as Tim showed signs of boyish curiosity. "Considerin' how few papers we see and how far away from civiliza-

tion we be, I think I've done remarkably well, seein' I only started twelve months ago," said Mrs Heineman, opening the book, mingled pride and pleasure in the simple act. A warm, steamy hand cleft the air in Timothy's direction. "Keep back," said his mother again, and "La! stop your whimperin', child," as baby Camelia pulled at her skirts.

Mrs. Heineman delivered the book into Hal's care. "What do you think of it?" she asked, picking the baby up in her arms.

Hal was too overcome to answer just at once. Broad, black bands of ink decorated each page. In this ebony stronghold were pasted the various "In Memoriam" notices culled from the "Gazette," that found its way monthly, after tedious journeying, into the small settlement, twelve or fourteen miles from the Cap.

"You have put them in very neatly, Mrs. Heineman," said Hal, gravely, his eye running over the dozen or so notices.

Mrs. Heineman beamed with delight. "You wouldn't believe what a time it took me," she said. "But, then, you see what a deal of pleasure I kin get from readin' them over. Joe can't read, so I read them out to him, and it passes the time wonderful, jest a-thinkin' who and what all these people were."

Hal put the book gently on the table. What

a world of pleasure those gruesome notices had given, were giving, were destined still to give. To be able to read showed that Mrs. Heineman was a woman of culture. In those days of few schools and meagre learning, to find a bush-woman who could read was almost an event. But then, as Mrs. Heineman had told Hal more than once, "she had come out of a two-story house to marry Joe Heineman." The two-story house had been the only hotel in the settlement t'other side of the brush, yet the glory of that voluntary flitting was still reflected on the magnitude and honesty of Mrs. Heineman's girlish affection.

Joe, it must be said, fully appreciated the sacrifice, and the love which so often gives way to hurtful bickerings and repining continued to rule the little isolated bush homestead, and to make the many lonely hours enhance those of dearer, closer companionship.

It was still early when Hal left the log hut beneath him, and waving to Timothy, who sat perched disconsolately on the roof, disappeared into the tangle of underbrush netting the whole side of the mountain. Native box barred his way, wild raspberry vines proved a pitfall to unwary steps. Smilax and the deadly night-shade smothered the ground, killing the grass, or turning it to a sickly yellowish tint; only

here and there the coarser kangaroo and blady grass shot up underneath, defying annihilation. Towards the summit of the mountain the underbrush thinned, allowing the grass to predominate; the timber too, was sparse and more stunted, geebungs abounded, and cotton plants grew thickly between ash and mahogany. In a thin curling line of blue the smoke of Mrs. Heineman's chimney rose far below, and the silence was shattered with the loud voices of the magpies at variance with the peewits.

Only for a moment Hal Wiseman rested. He was making for the brush on the other side. If only that fire had been near the brush it might have saved him much hard work. As it was, he did not think it would veer this way at all. The mouth of the brush was yellow with the blossom of the English laburnum. It had sown itself broadcast, and now the honeysuckers and the bees were picknicking to their heart's content. Beyond this plantation rose the brush, black, dense, forbidding, and, according to the blacks for miles around, haunted by evil spirits and debbil-debbils. Superstition did not worry Hal. He meant to ring-bark many of these gigantic trees blocking the way. Great willorouks waved wide, fan-like leaves high overhead. Red, blue, and spotted gums stood in solid walls. Hoary mountain oaks locked branches with the tallow

woods, kurrajongs, and turpentines, and at their feet, among the slimy boulders and rotting wood, ferns grew and creeping plants, grey-green lichens, emerald mosses, and scarlet fungi.

Undaunted Hal slipped into the depths, measuring the trees with a practised eye, singling out those that would be better left. In this dim palace of nature the air was cool, and a damp vapour oozed from the spongy earth. Hal paused and mopped his forehead, and presently the ring of his axe rang clear and resonant, vieing in its music with the voice of the water singing in some secluded gully. And while he worked the haze on the Razorback grew thicker, denser, curling and writhing through glen and valley and along the range, shrouding its blue with a greyish-dun coloured veil that gradually stole higher into the sky, to hang there like a lowering war-cloud.

In the settlement men grew uneasy and women stood in their doorways straining their eyes towards that grey snake creeping along the mountain. While Hal worked in the bush he did not feel the hot fierce wind that sprang to life, shrivelling the young leaves of the taller trees and scattering the yellow blossoms of the laburnams. Instead he boiled his billy and ate some thick sandwiches well lined with dry corned beef, and listened meanwhile to the songs

of the bell-bird and the rich sweet note of the rarer organ-bird, and once he spied a rose-breasted robin peeping at him from a small thick shrub.

And ever the hills laughed, holding their sleek sides in glee as they urged the grey snake forward with the lash of a stinging wind. Soon the settlement turned out to a man and burned a ring about the homes, the little church, the school, and the two-story public house; and the women put great cans on their fires, and brewed deep pots of tea, while the children cut green branches from the tender saplings in readiness for any emergency, and the smaller children huddled together and whispered tales their parents and grandparents had told them of how whole settlements had been burned out and precious lives saved only by a miracle.

Joe Heineman drove out of the village in company with his wife's brother, and as they drove their voices were anxious and their eyes were ever scanning the smoke blotted ranges.

"If it keeps like this, Bill," said Joe, "it might do good and not much harm; but if it gets to the north-west of that brush with this wind blowin' my little caboose will be done for, and Wiseman's selection swept clean as a slate. The settlement's pretty safe now, but this wind will

blow the sparks for miles. Git up, Bally! Trot out like a good old gal—the fate of nations hangs in the balance."

So he strove to jest with his own fears as he urged the mare forward. Being a taciturn young man Bill did not answer, and to Joe Heineman, the miles between him and his home grew into an interminable barrier.

It was Timothy who first saw the fire striding up the Saddlehorn. He had climbed a straight thin gum to see if there were any eggs in the magpie's nest at the top, and from this vantage point he was able to view a fair portion of the surrounding country.

The Saddlehorn was a short abrupt peak standing out clearly in the centre of a range a little to the west of the brush. Timothy knew that a fire in that direction meant danger to the settlement and possibly his own home. He slid from the tree in less than a second and ran to find his mother and baby Camelia.

About the same time that Timothy discovered the fire's new path some subtle instinct sent Hal to the mouth of the brush. The heat of the outer world struck him like a blast from some awful furnace, and the wind blowing hot and strong from the west, scorched his already sunburnt skin to a brighter red. Along the side of the mountain the trees seemed to be shrinking

and changing from their usual green and red-brown tones to a dull dirty hue. The bush had grown strangely silent; not even a minah called, and the bees had left the laburnums.

Hal glanced at his watch. It was just three o'clock. He was ready for tea again, but put the desire aside and strode farther up the side of the mountain. The atmosphere was heavy with smoke. He had noticed a moist blue vapour growing denser in the brush, but had been too busy with his ring-barking to give it much attention. That fire on the Razorback must have spread considerably, and with this wind blowing anything was possible. It was just as well to go and see if Joe Heineman had returned home. If the fire was coming this way things looked serious.

As he reached the summit he saw that the fire was heading straight for the settlement. The least swerve of the wind to the north and it would veer towards the tiny log cabin and his own rough hut. Hal's progress over the slippery wind-scorched grass, and through the baffling belt of undergrowth, seemed to him a snail's pace.

Watching anxiously in the opposite direction for her husband's return, Mrs. Heineman did not see Hal's approach, and at the unexpected sound of his voice she turned a startled strained

face to him. A swift flash of relief swept across it. Both realized the danger and the need of instant action.

"Joe's got the horse and cart," said the woman, quietly. "I guess we must trust to Shank's pony and make for the creek below your place."

"At once," said Hal, abruptly.

It remained to be seen whether the creek could be reached in time. The wind was blowing straight from the west.

Mrs. Heineman darted into the house, cast a hurried glance around, relinquishing with a sharp pang all those humble household goods that had been won so hardly through the years of her married life. "Come, children," she said, snatching up baby Camelia and going out again.

A silent little party stumbled down the slope to the rough track leading towards the creek, and in a round-about way to the settlement. Perspiration dripped off Hal's burnt face, hung in moist drops across Timothy's forehead, rolled slowly down his mother's care-worn cheeks.

"I wants my dolly," whimpered baby Camelia.

"Hush dear, hush," breathed her mother, her arm straining close to her side, so that something hard and square should not slip to the ground.

"I've got my tommyhawk," said Tim.

"If we have to run throw it away," said his mother, guiltily.

Tim's small heart sank, and he clutched the handle of his beloved tommyhawk more firmly and determinedly.

"Let me carry her," said Hal, turning to the woman and her baby.

"No, not yet," said Mrs. Heineman. "She's best with me. If we have to run, you'd best take her then."

Baby Camelia snuggled closer against her mother, and the small cavalcade fled as quickly as they could towards the creek. Behind them the smoke seemed to close like a great gate, shutting off old familiar landmarks, trees, boulders, stumps. It got into their eyes so that it smarted horribly, and the wind sent the dust from the track swirling up into their nostrils until they felt suffocated.

"It can't be far behind," said Hal, quietly, picking Timothy up in his strong young arms. The child was gasping for breath, and once or twice a deep cough had racked his thin body.

"If Joe had only bin here with the cart," breathed Mrs. Heineman, unhappily. She was not strong and fear and nervous dread were beginning to tell on her. Unaware of danger baby Camelia had fallen asleep, and had become a dead weight on her mother's stiff arms.

Suddenly a great crackling rose behind them, and the day grew unbearably hot.

"Run!" screamed the woman.

In his fright the tommyhawk slipped from Tim's fingers, and Hal's burnt face became tense and strained.

An immense tree which had been ring-barked some weeks before had become a vast mass of writhing flame. At the same time that the tree caught fire, the welcome vision of an old bay horse and two anxious men was seen pushing doggedly through the mantle of enveloping smoke.

"Thank God!" whispered the woman, to her sleeping child. "We may reach it yet."

It did not take long to put the woman and children in. Bill and Hal would make a dash for it. The cart turned on a pivot and old Bally leaped forward on the return journey, even more cognizant of the danger than her masters. There was only one fence in the way. Fortunately Bill and Hal were there in time to let the rails down, and with a snort of fear Bally rushed over them and on through the crackling grass. The thick shrubs of the creek were in view. Here and there along the banks an ironbark or she-oak stood stoically, their branches a mass of grey curling leaves tossing restlessly in the fierce wind.

Down the mountain side little red and yellow flames were licking the ground hungrily; other trees had caught alight, sparks and smoking twigs were flying on the wings of the gale. All knew that by this time the log cabin must be a wide sheet of flame.

The cart slipped down the steep bank, and the water washed the wheels, and cooled the heated heaving body of the snorting horse. Deeper still sank the cart, until the water crept through the cracks of the floor and lapped Timothy's bare feet.

Joe stood up and broke branches from the ironwoods and sassafras. Bill and Hal were shoulder-deep near Bally's head.

So thick was the smoke that the whole landscape was blurred and hidden, only now and then one saw a bluish light creeping through the grass or heard a loud rattling in the treetops or smelt the peculiar odor of green leaves scorching.

"It's makin' for your shanty, Wiseman," said Joe Heineman, soberly. "Straight as a dart it's goin'. It's jest singin' this corner of the creek. Lie low Tim, it ain't gawn yet," as Tim's dominant curiosity awoke.

"I guess the settlement escaped by a hair's breadth," said Bill, soberly. "They didn't burn

that there ring none too soon, Joe, I'm thinkin'."

"No," said Joe.

Tim suddenly made a discovery. "Look at the birds, mum," he cried, pointing excitedly to the trees.

"Where?" asked his mother, wearily, moving baby Camelia gently in her lap. At her side lay the beloved book, the only thing saved from her home.

Among the thick fringe of ironwoods, sitting silent and watchful, were numbers of small birds—swallows, sparrows, soldier-birds, pee-wits, tiny wood doves, shy pigeons, brilliant parrots, blue-black mutton-birds, and even a mottled sparrow-hawk. A common danger had sent them flocking to this place of comparative safety. Fear seemed to have paralyzed them, for as human eyes were focussed an them, not a tiny feather moved or a small head turned.

As they watched the birds, something slid into the creek with a low splash. Bally backed restlessly, rolling terrified eyes to and fro, and presently the head of a black snake appeared above the surface of the water as it swam further up the creek and disappeared behind the veil of smoke.

As the sun sank, lurid and awful, the hearts of Hal Wiseman and Joe Heineman were heavy

with the sense of disaster. In their mind's eye both saw the charred remnants of what had, at least. been a shelter, both guessed that fences put up with much labor had been destroyed, that the work of months had been demolished utterly. The fire had swept on down the mountain side, leaving only burning trees and smoking logs in its wake. The creek had proved a sort of brake, the fire running along its western bank for a time, then as the creek bent abruptly north, the fire had shot ahead in a straight line for Hal Wiseman's hut.

When the writhing, curling flames had gone past, Joe Heineman drove Bally up the opposite bank, reaching the top with a jerk and a straining of sodden harness. Bill and Hal made their way over some time before.

"Git in," said Joe, "we must make tracks for the settlement, providin' it's left standin'."

Darkness fell as they went. Since sunset the wind had veered again, and now came from the east, blowing the smoke back and revealing the hills twinkling and brilliant with a million lights. Where before wild bush had reigned supreme, great cities now seemed to stand. On prominent heights lurid searchlights appeared to flash for a moment and die away, and now and then a great beacon blazed high, throwing the lesser lights into insignificance.

In the jolting cart a woman watched, wide-eyed, motionless, her eyes on the gleaming cities, her heart crying pitifully for the little log cabin left desolate on the hills. In her arms a baby slept, fitfully; at her feet a boy's tired head bumped against her knees. The fire would burn for weeks. How long would it be before another home was ready to receive her? Seated beside her, a man mentally calculated his limited resources, and, as night settled down, the tight lines about his mouth became thinner and straighter beneath the heavy moustache. Only years would make up arrears of work; perhaps if he could not borrow a little they would have to let the selection go.

Joe gritted his teeth together. If he worked his hands to the bone, that should not happen; but corn was dirt cheap, and it took weeks to get timber to any kind of a market.

"Wee-ee-loc! wee-ee-loc! wee-loc! wee-loc! wee-loc!" Even the fire had not silenced the curlews, and their weird cries rang shrilly through the night. Under his breath Joe Heineman cursed them, and Hal Wiseman listened to them as in a dream.

To-morrow! What would to-morrow bring forth? His eyes were staring at a dun coloured sky, where a few pale stars were striving to shine. The years ahead, indeed, stood ranged

one upon another in a long unbroken vista of loneliness and desolation. Only to-morrow glared hideously near, tramping underfoot his dreams and desires, his ambitions and tender hopes.

It was late when they reached the settlement, but men and women were talking eagerly at their doors; the children were wide awake; the babies slept restlessly on their hot little beds. A red glare lit the settlement, doing away with all need of artificial light. In the strange brilliance men looked uncanny, and women lost the hard angularity of face and form, and a strange softness touched work-worn features, so that their husbands wondered vaguely at the change

Morning was winging her way across the hills when the settlement sank to slumber. In one hut alone a low voice broke the stillness. Someone was speaking persuasively, earnestly.

"He'll make it worth yer while, old man," said the voice, which strove to mitigate its natural harshness by whispering hoarsely.

The answer was slow in coming. "Then I'll think on it," came in low guarded tones.

On the opposite side of the thin calico partition Hal Wiseman moved restlessly in his sleep. "The long years," he muttered, and even in unconsciousness the pain of it rang

through his voice. Suddenly he sat up, and pushing roughly at the calico wall, called out, "Joe! Thank Heaven is that you?"

The silence of the bush answered him; then "wee-ee-loc! wee-ee-loc! wee-loc! wee-loc! wee-loc!" rang mockingly through the night.

"He's only talkin' in his sleep, man," murmured a voice near by.

. . . . . .

Two days later Hal rode home. It had taken most of the time to find Swagman and then to round up his scattered cattle. When he left the blackened, desolate paddock, with its charred remains of the hut and its still burning trees and stumps, life had seemed an impossible nightmare. As he drew nearer the lowlands, the blackened track still followed him, until in desperation and to rid himself of the queer twisted feeling in his throat, he broke into song. But the words were jumbled and the tune went wrong, and when the humble wayside homes hovered in sight, he gave up the attempt and stopped at each in turn to tell them of the havoc which the fire had wrought up there among the hills. Except for the wind veering again, these homes would have been swept aside, in spite of the ring burnt about one and all. Instead the fire had come to a standstill in a belt of scrubland a mile or so before reaching them. As Hal

had passed it he saw it sulking there, still grimly menacing. Fortunately, however, the skies were heavy with clouds, their jagged black edges threatening a deluge any moment.

Before he reached home it had begun, and the parched earth was greedily drinking in the great, clear drops beating against its scorched face. Up in the hills the smoke died down, leaving them still gloriously blue, though seared with a wide black scar, that only time would heal.

He found the little mother sobbing quietly in her small bare bedroom, a tear-stained Annette beside her.

From the north room came the sound of a deep monotonous voice which sometimes rose to a roar of rage or died away in uncanny silence. Hal's advent brought cheer and comfort, and gradually Annette's woebegone face broke into smiles, and the tears from his mother's eyes dried as she listened to his week's adventures.

That evening Gilbert drove home with Agnes. When she came in, a tiny blaze of light circling one finger, there was subdued laughter in the room where the fat tallow candles burnt dimly in their high brass candle-sticks. Afterwards Katrin came in and told them she had hot pancakes and gramma tarts and a shepherd's pie for tea if anyone wanted it.

As Gilbert opened the door and joined them, a rush of cold air blew one of the candles out. "I've got news," he said. "I kept it until we got back, Agnes," glancing at his sister.

"What is it?" asked Hal, his cheerfulness somewhat forced.

Gilbert flung his wet hat on the floor and began to unlace soaking boots. "Bertram Forbes had his back broken while breaking in a young filly. It seems he had only just got home from a fishing expedition somewhere near Aunt Fanny's. See anything of him, Agnes? And the day after he returned home he was killed. Unfortunate, isn't it! I wonder how Miss Parry will console herself. And the other," continued Gilbert, not noticing the silence of the room as he looked at Hal, "is that some rich old uncle in Scotland has left Mavis White £50,000."

The candles flared brightly for a moment, then dimmed again. Annette surreptitiously helped herself to butter and jam, and ate as fast as she could.

Two beautiful blind eyes were fixed on the place where Agnes sat tense and rigid, gazing at her brother Hal's dismayed face staring back at her from the opposite end of the table.

"Thought it would give you something to think about," said Gilbert, as he went to his

room, quite unconscious of the torture in two hearts.

Suddenly a door opened again and a dishevelled figure strode into the room. "While you eat, I'm to starve, am I?" roared Lewis Wiseman, going towards his wife, drunken rage in his wild blurred eyes.

With a quick movement Hal was upon him, pushing him with all his young strength out into the rain and blackness of the night.

CHAPTER XVIII

Sol's Pursuit of the Chestnut Colt

AT Tarawingee the vintage had been a busy one. The care and thought expended by Mr. Marchmont on his vines had fully repaid him. As there seemed twice as many grapes to be picked, more hands were put on, and for a week or so the vineyards were swarming with men and boys, rosy-cheeked maids and wrinkled women. Even the birds had got wind of the extra crop, and came in squadrons—cockatoos, parrots, honeysuckers, and sparrows by the thousand. At each corner of the vineyard men were kept busy loading and reloading their guns with small shot. In the cellars they hurried to and fro, emptying huge baskets of fruit into the wide deep vats, while the great hammers worked ceaselessly, their dull thud-thud filling the day, and the sound of bursting lobes and squirting juice formed a minor accompaniment.

In the kitchen the maids were beginning to prepare for the dance. Mince pies and fruit turn-overs, sweetbreads, cakes, and large trays

of tarts were stored in the depths of the pantry. At odd intervals, if anyone chanced behind the buggy shed, they heard a violin in the weird process of tuning-up, and perhaps the grizzled head of Timothy would appear suddenly from a secluded corner.

Thomas discovered him there one day, his body swaying with the pathos of "The Valley Lay Smiling Before Me." Thomas viewed him through a crack in the shed, and the sight of Tim's face with his mouth screwed in an agonized fashion over the bridge of his instrument, his eyes half-shut and blinking with the fervour of his art, sent Thomas into a fit of silent laughter. Picking up a whip handle he tipped Timothy's bullet-ventilated hat over on to his precious instrument.

"Blood and thunder!" spluttered Tim, violently. "Who the devil is it?" The music stopped abruptly as he gazed about.

Thomas's bright eyes mocked at him through the crack.

"Durn yer," said Tim, jamming his hat on again and twanging one string with a horny thumb.

"Tim," said the boy, confidentially, through the crack.

"I ain't deaf yet," answered Tim, still jerking the thumb vigorously.

Thomas slipped round to the back of the shed. "I'm going to the hut with you next month," he announced.

"Really," said Tim. "Who said so, may I ask?"

"I'm going, Tim, so don't pretend to make a fuss," said the boy, doggedly. "I'm going to have a week's fishing in the Dingo Creek—there's no end of fine perch there, and eels yards long."

"H'm," said Tim, thoughtfully. "'Orsehair?"

"If there's any fuss made, Tim, you can side with me," said Thomas.

"H'm," repeated Tim, the tail of his eye in Thomas's direction.

Thomas got up in a huff. "I'm going," he flung over his shoulder, as he went round a corner of the shed.

"The Valley Lay Smiling Before Me," lilted for awhile after he had gone, then died away altogether, and Timothy did some deep thinking as he put away his fiddle and went across to the cellar.

That year the great drawing room was even more crowded than the previous year. Many districts were represented, for, in view of his coming contest for parliamentary honours, Mr. Marchmont had issued invitations broadcast. Many from Wilton, Rosenthal, and Glenoak

were there, every settlement east and west of dividing streams and mountain was represented. Lone bachelors from secluded haunts turned up, their rusty dress suits brushed and in order for such an occasion. Maidens visiting surrounding districts came in their girlish charm of dainty gown and manner, thereby adding much zest and competition among the bachelors, and not a little smothered jealousy among the maidens of the districts.

But gazing through the crowded rooms filled with young smiling faces and blithely moving forms, Mrs. Marchmont missed more than one face. Myrtle Parry had not been able to stay. Mrs. Marchmont had vague suspicions that the fact of not being able to appear with her debonair, if somewhat volatile fiancé, had been the cause of her hastened departure. Forbes had written from some outlandish part of the country politely regretting his inability to accept Tarawingee's hospitality this year. Mrs. Marchmont further suspected that Miss Parry had only learned of his decision from that unaccepted invitation, though to do her justice, her spirits did not seem to languish under the neglect, neither did her capacity for coquetry with anyone who chanced within her immediate circle flag one iota.

Like a moth, Mr. Wentworth, the tutor,

hovered about the luring flame, regardless of frequent singeings, returning over and again to the glamour of that magic brilliance that perchance deigned for a moment to turn its warmth and glory in his adoring direction. When it departed, his singed wings fluttered rebelliously for a week or two round dear familiar spots, then were packed carefully away in a shabby suitcase, and Tarawingee knew Mr. Wentworth no more.

Naturally joy reigned in the schoolroom. Lessons had scarcely commenced when, lo! a second period of blissful freedom descended from the gods. When informed of the fact by two delighted sons, Mr. Marchmont glanced vaguely from his books and memoranda and murmured, "Schools, schools, I suppose. I must remember to look up a good one." And the boys had disappeared precipitately.

In her pantry, Mrs. Marchmont said aloud once or twice in an exasperated tone: "The fool! The fool!" and in the cellars and cottages of the workmen the tutor's too evident infatuation was discussed with a liberality of view peculiar to such circles.

The Wiseman's were not at the ball either. Mrs. Marchmont perhaps missed Agnes more than any of the others. She could not help wondering what had nipped a certain little

romance of last year so completely in the bud. Mr. Marchmont felt that something had been wanting when Agnes had not been there to pass judgment on his decorative efforts, and Benjamin, wandering round the big room the evening before, wished vaguely to hear a certain rollicking galop that a brown-haired child had played last year, but not for the world would he have owned to the wish, not even to himself.

Mavis White was there, a slender white-clad figure, weighed down under the responsibility of a fortune so unexpectedly thrust upon her. During her week's stay she laughed with the rest in the daytime, but at night the stars alone saw slow tears dripping down the delicate cheeks to the window sill. Why had he not come? Had he forgotten her already? Mavis shivered at the thought. Even if he were poor she loved him, and hadn't she enough now for two? Perhaps it was that which kept him away, and in the dark she would creep to her little bed and bury her golden head among Mrs. Marchmont's feather pillows, and sob until her young heart felt it must burst with this new, strange feeling that had taken possession of it.

On the Sunday after the dance the usual conclave was held in the front room of Mick's cottage. The red-haired youth had finished reading the serial and the spicy bits from the

two-sheet paper. The markets were up in Wilton and there was a flattering notice of Tarawingee's stock, consequently everyone felt the reflected glory of such public eulogy and congratulated themselves on living under such an easy "boss" as Mr. Marchmont. Outside, over an open fire, and suspended by a rusty chain hanging to an iron tripod, a kettle was gaily singing. Every now and then Timothy leaned forward from his log stool, under the passion vine, and deftly encouraged it to boil, by feeding the fire with dried bracken and twigs. Mick, lounging on the hard board couch just within the doorway, smoked a brand new pipe, alternately vowing it would prove the best he'd ever had or swearing profanely at its numerous shortcomings. But always as he spat beyond the doorway he cast a ruminative glance in Timothy's direction and blew heavy smoke wreaths from his nose and throat.

"Anyone 'ud think you was a chimbley on fire," remarked his wife, with wife-like freedom.

"'Um," grunted Mick.

In a corner of the room a thin white-faced youth shuffled a dirty pack of cards, Bella, as buxom as ever, a carelessly amused onlooker. "D'yer reckon yer can play, Sam?" she queried, sceptically.

Sam gazed at her with hurt washed-out blue

eyes. "Don't I just," he answered. "There ain't no one on this place kin get the better 'o me."

"Garn," said the girl, smiling broadly.

"Bet yer," said Sam, handling the cards with a facility which betokened frequent practice.

Suddenly Mick's huge body was heaved to a sitting position. "Hang me for a short-sighted fool," he cried. "If that ain't Solomon Gosling ridin' back! He ain't got the colt though."

An interested group formed about the doorway and Timothy transferred his attention from the fire to the top gate. Two or three young fellows who had been sitting or lolling around, hung over the back of the couch and vied with each other in wild surmise as to what had befallen Solomon, whither and how far his apparently unsuccessful quest had extended. Sam alone remained in his corner, shuffling the cards, stacking them, cutting scientifically, performing strange tricks. He was a new hand on the place, consequently Solomon Gosling's advent did not interest him.

"Th' ol' mare looks done," murmured Mick, as Sol drew near.

The head stockman's mount certainly showed signs of hard use. Sol's moleskins and coat were none of the cleanest, and the handkerchief knotted about his throat seemed yearning for

the tub. The mare ambled with a slight limp, and her usually glossy coat was rough, mud spattered in places, in others white with sweat from her long day's journey.

Sol was greeted by a sympathetic silence. Only in Timothy's eyes a gleam of wickedness lurked.

"Hot, ain't it?" said Mick at last, as he thoughtfully refilled his pipe.

"Pretty considerable," answered Sol, tersely, dismounting.

For a whole six weeks he had been after that colt, following one clue upon another, each in turn to end in nothing. His wrath, which had been of no mild order at the commencement of the campaign, had gradually assumed gigantic proportions. His thoughts positively reeked with revenge, his nightly dreams were lurid and startling. His suspicions migrated along two paths. One began from "The Hare and Hounds," the other centred about the dark-faced buyer at the yards. The uncertainty emanating from these two probable sources of his loss seemed to have made the squint in Sol's eyes more pronounced than ever, and his nose to travel in a more southerly direction. The uncertainty, likewise, of those two sources having joined forces had not improved his outlook on life. His ambition had dwindled to one

point—if he were to hang for it, he would find the colt and take his revenge. The turning of the other cheek was not conceivable in Sol's philosophy. That morning when the empty stall had confronted him, his decision had been made. "The boys" had taken the cattle home, and Benjamin had travelled under the safe escort of Tim Flannigan. Since then Tarawingee had not known Sol.

Mr. Marchmont, fuming at his henchman's lofty disregard of the position of master and man, waited his return with what patience he could muster. At such a critical time, when all his thoughts should be centred on his coming election, this unfortunate incident had occurred, and he had been forced to turn his attention to such mundane matters as stock and the best disposal of his valuable liquors. It was the first time that Sol had failed him.

As Sol unsaddled his mare he was conscious of many a curious glance, but grim taciturnity held his tongue. "Curious critturs," he thought, bitterly. "Let 'em wait. How's the caboose bin swimmin' along the last week or so?" he inquired, as he lounged against the wall after turning the mare loose.

"Much the same as usual," said a young fellow, anxious to hear the news. "Say, Sol," he said impatiently, "roll it out."

Sol took his measure scornfully and relapsed into silence.

"Kittle's bilin'," called Timothy, exultantly, as a stream of hissing water from the kettle's spout threatened to quench the fire.

Bella came out and filled the teapot. "My, I'm like a drought," she remarked, amiably.

Sol accepted a cup of tea, and it soothed him somewhat. After a time he began to feel the exquisite sense of importance which occasionally assails one on the journey through life. Unconsciously he expanded under its subtle influence until his tongue felt the oil tickling its hinges, and he launched forth into a lengthy and detailed account of his rambles. His audience listened appreciatively. The smoke-wreaths from Mick's pipe rose higher in the air, and at last the narrative claimed even the baby's attention, and he gazed from his mother's arms in round-eyed astonishment at this eloquent teller of tales.

"Reckon I've seen most of the country this side of the range," said Sol at last, wearying of his exalted position.

"Guess yer have," said a young fellow, enviously.

"Mebbe," said Mick at last, "that there colt, Sol, is browsin' somewhere quite near his startin' point."

"I figured that for a good bit," said Sol, "and kept a guard on the lookout; but 'tain't no good. All the colts ever seen now-a-days is either black or brown; the chestnut breed seems to have died out o' the colony."

"P'raps them with a white face will now be considered a hextinct species," soliloquished Tim, thoughtfully.

Sol surveyed him casually. Tim poked the hot ashes with the hardened toe of his boot, keeping his eyes well out of the range of Sol's.

CHAPTER XIX

Tom Marchmont Makes a Discovery

THE head stockman's return was an event to rejoice over. The furrow of worry across his master's forehead disappeared as soon as his tall form loomed at the study door. The boys greeted him boisterously, and for a time Tim's rising popularity suffered a relapse, a fact which by no means sweetened that gentleman's temper. He was even heard to doubt Sol's purchase of the colt, and put his tongue in his cheek when indignantly asked what other reason Sol would have for roaming the country like a wandering Jew.

A week after Sol's return, Tim, Sol, and the boys rode out of the home paddock followed by a numerous bodyguard of dogs, sleek-haired kangaroos, rough cattle pups, knowing kelpies, and a stealthy half-bred dingo. The rest of the men picked for the fortnight's rounding-up and branding were to follow later in the day.

It was early March, the tops of the mahoganies and ironbarks were flushed with a warm tinge, and the leaves of begonia and

kennedia were falling gently as though loathe to leave their vines half-nude to the cold of winter.

As they went Benjamin discoursed freely on the expedition of the previous year. Since his killing of the white dingo he had been regarded as a hero by the smaller fry among the cottages; even Thomas acknowledged his supremacy with more grace than before. The skin of that white dingo reposed in an honorable and conspicuous position in his father's study. No one ever ventured to stand on it. It was to be gazed at and admired from a respectable distance, and each time a stranger appeared within the portals of Tarawingee the whole story was recounted and enlarged upon with much parental pride.

To Benjamin's delight, Sol had treated him as a man ever since, and had so trained him in the use of firearms that the boy gave promise of being an extraordinary marksman. Thomas meanwhile had dreamed dreams and fished diligently in company with Bill, the scholar.

At sunset the hut on the mountain stood before them, the glory of the west changing its rough slab walls to gilded beauty. As they drew near an old wallaroo hopped away, casting as he went many curious glances at these disturbers of his peace, and mingling with them a haughty contempt for anything in the shape of dog.

Benjamin and Thomas had all they could do to keep them back, and only by oft repeated promises of a 'possum hunt that night could they keep the whining, whimpering creatures at heel.

When the moon rose, round and full, above the vastness of the forest, a silent quartette left the hut, and gun in hand proceeded up the mountain side, a dozen or so keenly exhilarated dogs in attendance, nosing the air, growling ominously at the crackling of a twig or the falling of ripened berries.

Every leaf where the light caught it turned to silver, each grass stem stood out like a polished knitting needle; the valleys were swathed in scarfs of blue mist, and the eastern side of each peak glowed boldly in the still, clear atmosphere. Wherever they looked a grim escarpment of rugged mountains reared its solid bulk above lowland and valley, standing like colossal giants, serene and calm, in their utter impregnability.

In some far distant age the mountains of Australia may have possessed height in proportion to their gigantic bulk; perhaps, too, in the dim vistas of the future they may echo with history and romance, as soul stirring and brilliant as any which song and legend wrap so

enchantingly about every peak and ravine of the older continents.

Meanwhile, beneath the weight of their tremendous geological age and comparative babyhood of human interest, nature rules as queen, clothing them in raiment of transcendent beauty, weaving robes imperial in colour—gold, purple, crimson, scarlet, pale violet, delicate azure, dream-like amethyst—softening their barren parts with falling scintillating diamonds, flooding each salient peak, almost fierce in its boldness, with fiery light, until bare crags glow with the transmutation of the most ancient necromancy.

"Hist!" Among the branches of a stringy-bark a black form crouched motionless The dogs broke into furious barking, leaping and fretting beneath the limb. Still the shadow crouched motionless, fearful of further self-betrayal. When a moonbeam filtered through the leaves, Thomas could see its head clearly outlined against the light. Suddenly a great kangaroo dog leaped high in the air, and the little shadow fell among hungry snapping teeth.

Thomas hurried on, he hated the end; but Benjamin wanted to see fair play. As they went up the slope, furry-coated creatures scuttled to shelter, dread terror in their wee thumping hearts. Now and then one, lazier than the rest,

or ignorant of its danger, betrayed its whereabouts, and the barking of the dogs echoed from ridge to ridge like the sharp report of artillery. With each capture the dogs went mad with delirious joy. For months they had not experienced such a night's sport. When the home call came they frankly rebelled, until their various masters were forced to threaten dire punishment for such rank disobedience.

Sunset saw the rest of the men on the field, Sam, the card player, among them. He was to prove the stoutness of his calibre at this round. Thin and seedy-looking, his appearance was found, before many days had passed, to belie his real strength. In the branding yard none could throw the untamed frightened beasts so easily or so well as he; few could manipulate the irons quicker or more dexterously, and for rounding-up he was a treasure.

At night he sat in the centre of a circle of silent admirers, while the cards disappeared, reappeared, were shuffled, stacked, and cut under the guidance of a past master in the art. Before a week had gone every man who was bold enough to play with him was in his debt to an amount which made some of them become, in imagination, spinners of the most subtle romances, warranted at the month's end to gull innocently inquiring wives.

To Benjamin, the boy became a hero. He dogged his every footstep, hung on his words, imitated his whistle, learnt surreptitiously, and only when Sol was lost in gloomy meditation on his mighty wrongs, to handle the greasy pack of cards. Timothy merely laughed at his clumsiness, thereby spurring the boy to prove himself a master, like his newly-discovered hero.

At night, too, some of the men drank from bottles which they had taken care to fill before leaving the land of plenty. Sam proved himself well versed in this art also; Benjamin grew sick with the smell of it, and though he tried, he could not swallow the nauseating liquid which the bottles held. Only once did Sam jeer at him for it, and then just as Benjamin was lifting the bottle to his lips, Sol's reverie forsook him, and he stood over Sam until that individual's washed-out eyes seemed to fade to a dirty white as a deluge of abuse descended upon him, threatening to wither his thin body and to send his soul to the very depths of oblivion and scorn. Before Sol had finished, the bottle lay broken in a thousand pieces, and the precious pack of cards was scattered to the four winds of heaven.

Thomas, it must be confessed, troubled the yards but little. During the day he either helped to bring in the scrub cattle, or that amusement palling, shouldered his fishing rod, and, following

a little track beginning at the base of Kangaroo Rock, went down into the gully below, where the fallen leaves were always damp and the warm black earth felt springy and moisture-sodden. The path meandered through the gully, round rocks, beneath fallen trees, up steep pinches, along slippery grassed places. It had been formed by the forest creatures more than by anything else. Unknown to anyone, Thomas had explored it on his last trip, and many times since he had ached to explore it still further. After proceeding along the faintly marked path for a good distance one came to Ranger's Pool, a deep natural well of clear, cold water. To the blacks of the district it was a debbil hole, bottomless, haunted by the dread bunyip, a place to be avoided, scarcely alluded to in ordinary conversation. But Thomas had no fear of such things. The pool was filled with fish and eels; the men welcomed his love of a pastime which provided them with such pleasant food, and Timothy took pains to do justice to the cooking of it, so that Thomas felt the long, glorious days were not entirely idle ones.

Three or four miles beyond the pool Thomas knew the forest held a secret. He thought he was the only one who knew that the old dilapidated house, built years and years before by

Henry Willoughby's convicts, was inhabited. As a matter of fact there were others who knew; but it pleased Thomas and inflated his boyish self importance to believe that he was the only person cognizant of the fact.

On one of his explorations, the previous trip, he had pushed his way through the underbrush far beyond the pool, when suddenly, where the ground had been damp from recent rains, he saw quite plainly the print of two small shoes. At first fear had entered his heart, and in a flash all the wild stories he had ever heard ran through his mind. Then courage returned and the boy felt that perhaps he was in time to rescue a lost child from one of the scattered mountain homes.

Coming into the open he was in time to see a child walking sedately through the trees. She lifted her little feet high as she walked through the wet grass. Her head was a tangle of flaxen curls, and hanging down her back a tiny scarlet hood dangled by its ribbons.

Thomas was in a dilemma. Where could she have come from? To whom did she belong? Highly perplexed he followed her, dodging behind trees whenever she paused to pick a wild flower or to listen to a bird singing in the trees overhead. They had reached the house before he was aware of it.

Everyone had heard of Henry Willoughby's mad notion of erecting a so-called hunting lodge in these well-nigh inaccessible regions. In years gone by he had acted as police magistrate for the district, and had delivered justice from the Bench upon as varied and mischievous a set of men as could have been unwillingly herded together in any community.

In time it played upon his nerves, and his own grey head bobbed uncertainly, and his tongue often refused its office as he meted out "three days hard labour" for drunkenness, or inflicted a heavy fine for insubordination to unruly convicts and freemen when his own state of health called for a like chastisement. Still the district acknowledged that Henry Willoughby had been a fine man. He had kept a tight thumb over the convicts, and the few desperate characters who had escaped during his reign had been captured and summarily dealt with.

To please himself he had had this house built. Strong virgin timber formed its walls, beams, and supports; the roof and verandah were shingled, and the walls within plastered. Its strength had assuredly been proven, for after many years it still stood erect, defying alike time and weather. Here and there the shingles had been torn off in heavy gales; in places the

pillars of the verandah were worm-eaten, the flooring boards had long since rotted. Inside too, plaster had fallen from the walls, exposing the bare laths, and the joists beneath the floor were slowly giving, leaving the boards loose and liable to sink down or spring unexpectedly upwards as one walked across them.

Here, old Henry Willoughby would retire periodically with some boon companion to recoup his shattered nerves, returning to civilization a month afterwards with his voice louder and more bombastic than ever, his old eyes bulging with the increased importance of his neglected duties. All the district would be on the qui vive to receive him, for, with his nerves regained, their police magistrate was a veritable tower of strength to the community.

Perhaps only when he had seen the last rough mile peg fade into the distance would Henry Willoughby regret those empty bottles left behind, and think with a sharp pang of the hilarious nights when the bush resounded with the stentorian roar of his lungs, and the days glided by to an accompaniment of weird snores. There were other things too that he fled from. Sometimes the spiders up there in the hills grew so large that his eyes stuck out with fright at the thought of them. He knew, too, where the blue snakes lived, and the ugly scarlet toads.

Yet Henry Willoughby was a fine man, and he never spoke of these things to anyone, except perhaps to the friends who went with him.

It was towards the dilapidated shell of the erstwhile police magistrate's house that Thomas followed the flaxen-haired child. Just as she reached the door, she turned unexpectedly and saw him.

"I felt someone was behind me," she said, quite clearly, and without the least semblance of fear. Then she went in and shut the door, leaving Thomas spellbound outside.

After a while he ventured as far as the window and peeped in.

"Go away," said the child, beating her fingers against the broken panes. "They'll be coming back soon. Go away."

So Thomas very reluctantly retraced his footsteps through the forest until he struck the path, following it in a dream, through the gully, up the mountain side, and so on to the hut, where the men were gathering for the evening meal.

Thomas had often in fancy visited the place again, had acted a hundred different scenes. Sometimes he carried the child away in his arms, again he would slay the cruel creatures who kept her there; but always he saw the little face gazing at him through the window, heard

the soft tattoo of her fingers against the pane.

It had required herculean efforts to keep his secret from Benjamin, who, Thomas felt sure, would have wished to organize a rescue party and start at once to bombard the house.

Thomas felt that such proceedings would be drastic. He cherished vague dreams of some day riding up to that closed door, and in a fierce voice that would strike terror to the wicked keepers, demand the maid. He thought often of his great secret as he fished in Ranger's Pool. After a year's cogitation on the subject, the glamour of it had increased twenty-fold, but the impetus to investigate more fully into the matter seemed tardy in coming.

He began to ache for a confidant, and at last determined to sound Tim on the subject of the old house. Tim was a source of much knowledge, and it was quite possible that he might have heard something of it. Tim slept near Thomas in the hut, and one night, when the moon had swung to the zenith, almost wiping the stars from the sky in her brilliance, he awoke suddenly, fired with a desire to question the old sailor. His hand groping gently out towards Tim felt only space. Thomas turned sleepily and saw that Tim's place was vacant. He sat up quickly. Had Tim gone possum hunting

without him? Through the open door he saw Tim's squat figure disappearing behind Kangaroo Rock.

"Tim," yelled the boy, "wait for me."

"Steady youngster," breathed a sleepy voice. "Yer ridin' the nightmare, are yer? Pull up sharp lad, or she'll throw yer."

Thomas struggled against the strong hand gently pulling him down, but as he struggled, sleep overpowered him and presently his snores mingled in the chorus of the rest.

On the opposite side of the hut, where the shade was blackest, someone else had been wakened by the sailor's stealthy movements, and Sol's eyes glinted strangely in the gloom as he, too, watched Tim disappear over the brow of the hill.

CHAPTER XX

The Election

AFTER a time Sol rose leisurely, and stepping guardedly over sleeping forms went forth into the moonlight. It was long since he had traversed the path through the gully. Mr. Marchmont's run extended in the opposite direction, and comprised most of the suitable grazing lands on the summits and sides of two or three short spurs. Towards the west the land was scrubby, and covered in a tangle of native box, raspberry and hawthorn, the grass growing thin and sour.

Sol moved circumspectly, his brain striving to regain its old knowledge of the path's various twists. Around and above him opposums were calling to one another in raucus grunts, and now and again one swung from an overhanging limb or scuttled frantically to higher branches. From ridge to ridge the boobook owls were droning their solemn "boobook! boobook!", the feebler call of the tawny frogmouth sometimes sounding its "'oom, oom, oom!" when the boobooks paused for breath; while almost under

Sol's feet the quail were booming in their peculiar monotone, and the curlews were uttering shrill ear-splitting cries. Down into the darkness of the gully, where a white fog rose in a filmy veil between the trees, Sol plunged, his mind on fire. What was it Tim sought? Sol scarcely conceived it possible that he should have anything to do with the unruly characters that but lately had been burning crops and sheds.

Certainly, no one quite knew who they were or where they came from. Cattle and horse stealing was rife, too. Sol ground his teeth at the thought.

He had given Tim plenty of time to go ahead, yet Sol had small difficulty in following, for at frequent intervals the moon betrayed Tim's heavy footsteps.

Where the underbrush thinned the moon fell upon the ground in still white patches, pure and glistening as snow, for a heavy dew was falling, spangling the hairy leaves of the raspberries and the tender spikes of the budding hawthorn.

Sol's well-tried nerves began to beat fiercely. Just ahead, the undergrowth was being brushed rudely aside, and echoing sharply through the clear atmosphere came the occasional sound of a dead twig snapping. Some sixth sense told Sol that the man ahead was running now, for

the moon had crossed the zenith and he must be back at the camp by daybreak. The water in Ranger's Pool flashed like a dull emerald as they passed, the moonbeams falling across its ruffled surface in long thin shafts of light. At last both men emerged into a natural avenue of bluegum. When this had fallen behind, Sol saw the ancient and decrepit house standing a little way ahead, guarded at both ends by gigantic figs, which cast heavy shadows across roof and verandah. A light glimmered in one of the windows, and towards this Timothy bent his steps.

Sol saw him rap upon the panes, saw the light disappear a moment from the window as the door opened to admit him; then the light gleamed once more from the window, and Sol was left in a high state of righteous indignation on the edge of the thick belt of scrub in front of the house.

What could he do? He felt positive that Tim must be a spy and catspaw for this suspected gang of men. The instinctive dislike he always had for the sailor seemed now to have some tangible foundation. He pondered the advisability of waiting until Tim reappeared, and on the way back, forcing him to divulge his intentions and knowledge of the gang, against the plan of investigating into the matter him-

self, and discovering what that lighted room contained before returning to the hut to lay plans for the self-betrayal of Timothy. In the end he chose the latter idea.

Except for that red glow in the window there was no sign of life about the place, yet Sol was wary. This was probably the head-quarters of the gang. They would all be gathered in that room; perchance one even now peered from the window upon the wonder of the moonlit forest. No, it was more likely that they would be staring at Tim, listening to what he had to say.

"The infernal blackguard," muttered Sol, between set teeth.

Keeping along the edge of the scrub, he at length came in line with one of the fig trees. Between the scrub and it was a clear space of about fifty yards. To cross this circumspectly, and with due regard to self effacement, threw the head stockman into a deep reverie. If he were seen, the future was indeed uncertain. He gazed vainly for a cloud in which the moon might lose herself for a short space, but the heavens were luminous with a clear brilliance that scorned all subterfuge. His ears, strained to catch the slightest sound, listened intently for voices, but only the murmur of the forest broke the intense stillness, though once he fancied he heard the complacent snuffle of a

horse as it fed. The moon swung over a magnificent red-gum. Before it had slipped to the west of its mighty limbs Sol had crossed the clear space and was standing in the thick shadow of the figs, peering into the window.

What he saw made his deep-set eyes bulge with astonishment. A fine ebony chessboard inlaid with glinting mother o' pearl, ranged upon it the various kings, queens, knights and pawns, and seated solemnly at either side, Timothy and a white-bearded refined looking man, whose remarkable similarity to Mr. Marchmont about the upper portion of the face, caused Sol's eyes to stick out like a bewildered frog. The forehead, broad, unmistakably intellectual, the eyes set wide and slanting slightly upward, thus giving the face rather a peculiar aspect, were identical; the nose, however, was broad, and the lips were completely hidden beneath the heavy white beard. So strong was the likeness that, except for the beard, Sol could have sworn it was his master sitting there playing chess with the evident delight of a connoisseur in the subject. Sol played a little himself—Timothy had taught him—but the game under way lacked interest to the uninvited onlooker.

Suddenly Sol saw that along the rough erection of slabs a third person sprawled. His head and face were hidden behind Timothy,

but as Sol gazed he saw him take two coins from his pocket and toss them into the air, so quickly and deftly that Sol could have sworn there were a dozen. Various emotions were surging through Sol's brain, astonishment perhaps being uppermost.

The players had not as yet moved a piece. Both bent earnestly over the board, entirely oblivious of the third person in the room. At last Timothy moved a king, and, as though foreseeing his opponent's capitulation, leaned back against the wall and—but Sol did not wait for him to lift his eyes. The shadows of the figs were thick and black, and Sol disappeared for a time from the window. When he looked again, after a suitable lapse of time, both players bent over the board, and the occupant of the rough couch had disappeared.

Quite suddenly, and without any previous warning, Sol heard a horse picking its way through the thistles growing in a wilderness about the house. Flattening himself against the wide trunk of the fig he waited expectantly, and only by a stupendous mental effort stifled the exclamation which threatened to leap from between his clenched teeth.

Riding away from the house was the buyer of the saleyards, his profile sharply outlined in the moonlight, so that Sol could not mistake it.

But that which took his breath away was the fact that he rode the chestnut colt, still sleek and beautiful, and seemingly in no wise averse to the unlawful ownership of his present master.

With a self control, scarcely conceivable even to himself, Sol waited until the rider entered the belt of scrub; then, without even a thought to the engrossed chess-players, sped after his long-lost colt, his fingers gently feeling the muzzle of his small revolver suspended to his belt. The rider had forged ahead while Sol waited. As he sped under the silent bluegums, save for himself and the flying squirrels leaping from tree to tree, there seemed to be no sound of life. Then, breaking back through the forest, came a horse's clear neigh.

Revenge winged Sol's footsteps. Underbrush bent and swayed before him. Impeding logs and fallen limbs crouched close to the ground in fear of this pursuing Nemesis; screeching plovers fled before him and dodging quail boomed on either side in desperate fear.

Sol caught him watering the colt at Ranger's Pool. The horse drank in long thirsty sups, raising his splendid head at intervals and letting the water slip slowly down his well-bred throat. The man sat loosely in his saddle, his lithe body silhouetted against a clear space between the trees. As Sol drew near, hidden by the haw-

thorn and tangle of box and raspberry, the horse's ears pricked slightly and he snuffed the air guardedly and in deep breaths, pausing longer between his sups of water. The muzzle of Sol's revolver felt a firm hand slip tenderly over its sold cold surface and the trigger moved easily as a finger fell upon it.

The man on the horse turned swiftly in his saddle as the underbrush fell aside and a lank figure stepped into view. But as his eyes struck fire and his whole body became tense with resistance, he suddenly fell limply to one side, frightening the colt so that it reared, and in its downward plunge struck its rider's head with a horrid sound of heavy iron falling on something softer than itself. Waking the sleeping hills into unearthly commotion, the report of Sol's revolver echoed sharply until it died away gradually and was locked in the fastnesses of the fog-wrapped valleys.

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In the months that followed Tarawingee seethed with a strong undercurrent of suppressed excitement. Even the dogs became imbued with the prevailing sentiment. At night when the men held heated conversation in the buggy shed, discoursing at length on their varied political views, the dogs would congregate without, as though aware of the momentous themes

under discussion. Presently, as the men's voices rose high under the stimulus of argument, the old dogs would begin to howl mournfully, mysteriously, as though realizing in their dumb intelligence the seriousness of their master's political campaign. Inspired by their elders, the pups would break into staccato yelps of incomprehension; soon the yard would echo with their expressed and long-drawn-out sympathy.

Naturally, the men's voices rose higher, until Tim's roar could be heard above the dogs as he harangued a cantankerous and unruly audience.

"American terbaccer," would be hurled vociferously at the heads of the boys until the smoke-hidden rafters rang with it.

Land Acts, the Status of each Colony, the Right of Selection on Leased Runs—all this and much more received due attention.

Sol weighed the various questions deeply, with much sagacious head-shaking and expostulating with Mick and Tim. On Sunday Bella argued with the men until the air became sulphurous. As she poured tea into the thick white cups she would cry belligerently: "I want ter know why America can't send her tobacco in; saves time and labour and the sweat of the honest hard-working man's brow." Bella would beam at her own eloquence.

Furtive winks between the men would egg

her on. "Why, if them fool Americans want to slave themselves to death over the sticky, dirty stuff, why don't you let 'em boys? Peace is my motter! Let 'em do it in peace."

A decided "No'm" from Sol here would precipitate matters. One or two of the others would begin to voice their opinions—question, answer, surmise would become lost in a hopeless jumble of words.

Bella would first frown, then slop the tea over the cups. and finally succumb beneath the weight of masculine verbosity. Meanwhile Tim would argue with himself until he was almost black in the face. Mick would alternately listen or shout his long-thought-out and much-smoked-on opinions, while Sol would continue to speak to all and sundry in a loud even monotone until gradually the others would give away, and he remained master of the field.

Occasionally Mr. Marchmont would issue from his study, and, a sheaf of papers and memoranda in his hands, would mount the empty cask standing under the box-trees. In an instant the men would be around him; the dogs, too, would slink between their legs and crouch in a circle before the cask. With an uplift of eyebrows and a short "H'm," Mr. Marchmont would clear his throat, wave his right hand and begin, "Gentlemen, the colony

needs just such men as you—men of decided opinions, men with ideas in their heads, men whom money will not buy, nor undue influence cause to falter in their deeply-seated opinions."

From his perch beside the orator, cocky would murmur, "Can't you 'ear me? Can't you 'ear me?" while the men would grin at their master's perspicuity.

With eyes on the moving leaves of the box trees Mr. Marchmont would continue his address. "We must uphold our industries, gentlemen. A young nation must ever be watchful over the encroachments of older nations. They will assail her in unexpected places, will undermine her determinations, will endeavour to steal her beauties from her ere she awakes to the fact. Tobacco growing! That industry, which flourished so marvellously a few years ago! What of it now! Dying, gentlemen, dying, in its death throes. But,"—becoming persuasive—"you may rescue it, gentlemen; you may again place our home-grown tobacco first on the markets of the world. You, and you alone! Who flinches at the work ahead?"

Cocky would ruffle his feathers here, and eye the men with profound solemnity, while the dogs would cease their endless search after the flies and await the answer.

Stolid, unblinking, the ring of men would

stand silent, scarce knowing whether their master wished them to speak or awaited his answer from unseen crowds. The pause lengthening, Mick, perhaps would splutter vehemently, "Give us 'ome industries, the 'ome industries, I says, boys. Out with the Yankee stuff!" Or Sol would respond with a grave and majestic "Them's my hopinions to a 'T'." Never did Tim venture an open dissent.

His audience presumably with him, Mr. Marchmont would grow doubly eloquent. The memoranda would be consulted, and much wisdom hurled at the moving box leaves. After this Cocky would be unable to slumber, and some of the dogs would growl savagely at the war-like note which would creep into Mr. Marchmont's voice.

For weeks past, attended by Sol or Tim, Mr. Marchmont had ridden from settlement to settlement enlightening the slow-thinking inhabitants as to which way they should vote. The journeys were arduous and long, and much refreshment was needed to accomplish them.

At every way-side tavern Mr. Marchmont would alight from his horse and wash his dry and dust-grimed throat with vile concoctions. He would also wink knowingly at the proprietor, and sound him deftly on his attitude towards the elections. Mr. Marchmont imagined he was a

pastmaster in the gentle art of "tapping." Usually, as he rode away he was followed by a broad grin and a contemptuous snap of tobacco-stained fingers.

Moss, his opponent, was a Wilton man, witty, pleasant-spoken, popular on all sides. Few entertained any doubts as to whom the honours would fall. Mr. Marchmont was not of the district; the other was, likewise his people had lived in Wilton many years and were well respected. Still Mr. Marchmont was hopeful, even cheerful. He read long speeches to "Louisa." He practised bowing to her; he even recited what he should say in the event of winning.

To all "Louisa" listened attentively and praised dutifully. "Henry" was a positive marvel. The district needed such a man; under his care it would forge ahead. She looked forward with pleasure to his ultimate success. For some time past the boys had been at school, so that the toiling candidate was able to work in an unwonted but highly appreciated atmosphere of calm.

Perhaps Mr. Marchmont would not feel quite so secure could he have seen a slouch-hatted individual canvassing the various settlements. in the interest of his opponent. Joe Heineman found his present occupation vastly more enter-

taining and remunerative than working on his selection. His employer was evidently of a generous disposition, even if eccentric.

On the night after the burning of his home, when the stranger had so mysteriously descended upon him as he brooded in the strange glare cast by the bush fire, Joe had had his doubts as to this new walk of life. They had vanished since. Not being able to borrow money, he had lost the selection. A poignant heart-burn will cause a man to grasp at anything which promises forgetfulness. So Joe placed his family with his wife's people and closed with the stranger's offer. At first, he found the constant riding tiring, the unaccustomed use of his tongue irksome. "Old Whitebeard," as he designated his employer, was a man of keen intelligence, of wide reading, possessed of an extraordinary power over his fellow men. He knew their innermost doubtings, their secret "ayes" and "noes." Once a man served under him he seldom wished to break away. There was a subtle charm in his high-handed taking for granted that they were with him heart and soul.

As Joe flitted between the settlements on either side of the hills he was filled with a sense of his own importance.

Many unseen currents were running under the peaceful surface of the mountain settlements.

These cross-currents emanated from "The Blue Maid" in Wilton, and from that other source so secret and baffling to many. Those from "The Blue Maid" were slower, more sluggish, seemingly content to let the more turbulent catch up and sweep them on in its brisk course.

Joe became an adept in many things. He learned to circulate spurious coins, to present an imitation bank note; he learned also to take a pleasure in these things. He was annoyed if the wine supply ran out sooner than was anticipated; if the farmers were more careful of their belongings; if Sol Gosling turned the yearlings and springers into a new paddock. Sometimes a long forgotten conscience smote Joe. But he quickly smothered it. Joe had received his instructions and for weeks past he had been working hard.

In the various settlements which had benefitted by Mr. Marchmont's open-hearted philanthropy there were many inclined to support him. To these Joe turned his attention. He worked well; so, also did his confederates. The hand of that eagle-eyed recluse reached far.

Polling day came, and excitement in Wilton reached its zenith. Long throttled opinions burst bounds, and were poured forth tumultously, heatedly, vociferously. In solid companies the men descended from the hills to

register their votes. Mr. Marchmont and his opponent were here, there, and everywhere, haranguing for the last time, these steady-eyed, mahogany-handed men of the soil. Gradually, as the day sped, Mr. Marchmont's voice waxed slower and thicker. A certain drowsiness came to his eyes; a languidness took the place of his usual briskness. All took a delight in drinking with him; all laughed behind his back, some openly jeered.

His opponent, alert, watchful, kept his head level, his voice suave, striving well and eagerly to steer his political ship into safe waters.

The men, save a few faithful spirits such as Sol Gosling, Tim Flannigan, and three or four others, Mick included, turned to the Wilton candidate. Here was a man who could hold his own, could drink a glass without losing his senses, could rap out a jest with the best of them.

The polling was heavy. The men registering each vote were fagged out; and horsemen and vehicles approached with red-faced, keen-eyed voters. Many knowing winks were exchanged, many low asides, much loud slapping on the back, sometimes an open opinion winged a lurid way overhead.

And as the day waned Sol's face grew long with anxiety, and he went often to the little

back room in the tavern, where his master sat, alternately beaming at a china dog sitting on the mantelshelf and quaffing deeply from a cracked jug.

The last vote had been registered; many of the voters had returned home; more had remained to drink, play cards, and exchange reminiscences of other elections. The atmosphere of the town was electric. Every man scented blood and was out for battle.

It was late when the first faint cheer rose. Mr. Marchmont stirred sleepily in his rickety chair. Sol puffed a little harder at his pipe as he listened to the cheer and watched his master. Presently as another came, he rose and went out. A little man was standing high up on a balcony trying to speak. Every now and then a cheer rumbled in the throat of the crowd congregated beneath, but the little man's voice held it as yet in leash. Once Sol started and stared. For a second a face had showed in the crowd—a face familiar in some way to Sol. As he pondered, striving to place it, Tim brushed past, swung his old hat high over his head, and roared, "Freetrade for ever, boys!"

At once the crowd took it up. Cheer after cheer rose, swelled and sank to silence. The little man gave up trying to gain a hearing and stood watching. Moss came out and stood

bowing left and right. All the returns were not yet in, but the majority of votes in his favour was so far in advance of his opponent that he might safely consider the day won.

Sol found himself suddenly and unaccountably in a mighty rage. First of all, he knocked the heads of two shouting lunatics together; he then deliberately proceeded to pull the hair from the heads of several yelling fanatics; finally he found himself pummelling the leading blacksmith of the town. Here, however, he met his match, and the blacksmith landed a brawny fist full on the side of Sol's head.

"Thank yer," said Sol, politely, "and take that fer your pains," returning the compliment with interest.

The crowd had become all at once a mass of seething men and boys. Dogs barked on its outskirts; a woman's high laugh fell from an overhead window, and was promptly swallowed up in the din and babel of many masculine voices raised to their loudest pitch.

Moss, the new member, had quickly ordered every tavern to serve free drinks at his expense. He was eventually chaired through the town.

Extricating himself from the excited crowd, Sol made his way slowly through the streets to that small room where his master slept. Mr.

Marchmont was snoring loudly as he entered. Sol's entrance awakened him.

"Eh, Sol," he queried, drowsily, "so I am triumphant?" His eyes were on the man's, his fingers fumbling helplessly among a small bunch of keys suspended to his watch-chain.

"We'd best go back," said Sol, gruffly.

"Eh, Sol, go back? Why I shall probably leave Tarawingee in your hands now. Kindly find my hat, Sol."

The old gentleman glanced about the room a trifle uncertainly. Sol very decidedly rammed the hat on his master's head, guided him out to the waiting buggy, and drove away unnoticed and in dead silence.

CHAPTER XXI

The Mysterious Robberies

IT was December when word came that a returning digger had been held up and robbed of £200.

Sol and Timothy heard the news in the midst of a long-drawn-out game of chess. Relations were much the same between the two men. Perhaps a little more sly malice on Timothy's part, and a graver, deeper watchfulness on Sol's, which had become even more intensified since the elections. The change had been since that night when Sol had left, as he thought, a dead man lying near Ranger's Pool, whom Tim, on passing an hour later, had found with still a flicker of life beating in the almost numbed pulse. Tim still breathed hard when he remembered the trip back to the old house, a dead-weight in his arms and not a little fear thumping in his heart; then the hurried return to the camp, which must be reached before the others discovered his absence. Then the knowledge that Sol knew—something—Tim could never discover how much.

Sol was in a similar dilemma, hence an armed neutrality.

The boys had not ceased telling new-comers how Sol had regained his chestnut colt; how for weeks he had roamed the country without success; how in the middle of the night he had been awakened in the hut by the low whinnying of a horse, which, on rising, he had found to be his own chestnut colt, bridled and saddled, and standing beside the branding yards. A feather could have knocked the boys down in the morning when Sol told them the wonderful news.

The chestnut colt ever since had been an object of attention at Tarawingee. It was stabled at night, and Sol slept beside it. It was rugged and groomed and rubbed with rags dipped in soft lard which Sol stole from the pantry, where it was kept for cooking purposes. The probability of having committed a crime affected Sol's conscience but little. "Them furriners" were meant to be exterminated like the wallabies and bandicoots, and Sol felt that Tim's record had not been so clean that he could afford to bring to light anything that he might have discovered. Still it puzzled Sol sometimes to know what Tim had done with "the furriner."

As the "boys" delivered the news of the robbery, Sol and Tim bent more intently over

their game, and it was quite three-quarters of an hour after that they put it aside still unfinished, and turned to discuss matters with the circle of excited and gesticulating men about them.

"Who'd yer say it was?" queried Tim, nonchalantly drawing forth his quid of tobacco and biting off a piece.

"Joe Simson's 'is name," drawled Tam Flannigan, who had lately appeared at Tarawingee.

"From way up past Hell Hole," volunteered someone else.

Tim spat violently, and took a second chew of tobacco. "Wot's goin' to 'appen?" he queried, scanning the ring of faces half hidden behind smoke wreaths.

"Things is goin' ter look lively soon, I reckon," drawled Tim, wagging a sagacious head, and watching Sol slouch slowly from the rough bare room behind the kitchen out into the starlight. Tim's eyes followed the tall, lank figure.

"£200 is a goodish bit," sighed a lad near the door.

"Specially when you've dug it up by the sweat of your brow," soliloquized another.

"The country's goin' ter the dawgs," commented a third.

Yet Sol felt certain, as he stood outside and listened, that one or two near relatives of those

within would assuredly have a say in the disposal of that £200.

The gold fever had swept over the country, upsetting and disturbing it. Rioting, gambling, and drunkenness were rampant ills not easily kept under. The fever was infectious, spreading like a fire let loose in the bush. Farms were deserted, shops shut, ships left idly rocking at anchor. Master and man, seized with a like contagion, left saner pursuits to follow the golden phantom.

Shearing time passed, but of shearers, a mere handful; harvest time, and a woeful scarcity of reapers.

Even at Tarawingee only a few of the old hands remained. Restlessness had sent the others in the wake of a beckoning will o' the wisp. Naturally the country swarmed with criminals of every nationality. Many were escaped or recently-pardoned convicts from Tasmania and the other colonies. From everywhere came rumours of murder or of robbery. In some parts bushranging was very actively revived; but, unlike the outlaws of old times, who had nearly all been escaped convicts and had taken to bushranging in lieu of any other means of livelihood, these were a new kind—men of the free settler class, who took to the bush actuated by false ideas of romance and the

base hopes of enriching themselves at the expense of those who had honestly earned their wealth—men who hunted in gangs, and had many relatives and friends scattered about the various settlements anxious and only too willing to shelter and protect them so that their own interests might not suffer.

About Tarawingee and the mountain settlements above it, Sol knew that for a long time there had been an organized gang of horse-stealers and cattle-duffers.

He knew also, that it was quite possible some of the workmen belonged to it. But the depredations were so well carried out that it was generally months after they had occurred that the losses were recognized, and never except in one instance, when Sol had been riding home alone from the mountain hut, and had intercepted a stranger in his friendly appropriation of some of the Tarawingee yearlings, had any of the culprits been caught red-handed.

The police had been on the watch some time before this, and on receiving Sol's description of a full black-bearded marauder, had been doubly watchful, with the result that a month or two afterwards the delinquent had narrowly escaped a severe sentence at a district court. Not wishing to take any risks, he had decamped, leaving a short-sighted friend to forfeit the

money rashly promised for bail. Sol was uncertain whether this enterprising individual belonged to a gang or worked alone.

The last episode, however, was of a bolder description. The man who had been robbed of his earnings had also been roughly handled. He had been one against three or four, and though he had been returning home unexpectedly, as he thought, wind of his intentions had evidently flown ahead of him.

The memory of that night when he had stood in the shadow of the figs in front of Willoughby's old house, had impressed itself indelibly on Sol's mind. It rose up and worried him now. Who and what that stranger could have been remained for ever a subject of burning curiosity in his slow-moving brain. But throughout the colony there were many who lived in a strange isolation, incomprehensible to their fellow men. Wasn't there old Jep West, a crank of the highest description, living in a small cave between Wilton and Rosenthal? As far as Sol knew he was absolutely harmless, and for existence cultivated vegetables and bitter oranges. If anyone chanced upon him, he invariably replied to all questions in scraps of poetry or in language difficult for stray travellers to follow; at other times he maintained a grim silence

As Sol approached, the old man laid aside his spade and, saluting gravely, queried in a distant manner rather disconcerting when one has travelled far on an empty stomach. "What time o' day, is it, Apemantus?"

Glancing at the sun, Sol had answered. "Jest arter nine if I ain't mistook."

Jep had replied, still distantly: "That time serves still." Then, launching forth into a lengthy monologue, ended with:—

"Ceremony was but devised at first
To set a gloss on faint deeds, hollow welcomes,
Recanting goodness, sorry ere 'tis shown;
But where there is true friendship, there needs
none.
Pray, sit; more welcome are ye to my fortunes
Than my fortunes to me."

Sol's amazed face had not disconcerted Jep in the least. He continued to pour forth his wisdom in seemingly boundless generosity.

Sol made spasmodic efforts to stem the swift current without avail, until he reluctantly gave up the attempt, and, keeping his fascinated gaze on the old man's emotionless face, had retired from the field backwards, to where his horse stood tethered to a stump, a short distance from

the vegetable garden. The last he heard was:—

"If I could sell my horse, and buy ten more
Better than he, why, give my horse to Timon;
Ask nothing, give it him; it foals me straight
Ten able horses."

"Lor, lor," muttered Sol, hungrily, as he rode away beneath the dew-wet forest trees standing like a blank wall on every side of Jep's small clearing.

There was also old Simon, who lived in a tent near the ancient convict prison, who had never been known to say anything but "Quoth the raven, never more."

Still the mystery of the white-bearded chess-player baffled Sol to desperation. It seemed as though the earth had swallowed him, so completely had he vanished. Even rumour, roused for a time, had died a natural death. For after much cogitation, Thomas had told his immense secret to Bill, who in turn, finding it too overpowering for his peace of mind, had retailed it to Mick.

Mick had professed to be vastly amused, and after due reflection and a surreptitious visit to Henry Willoughby's old house, had spread the news far and wide. Much excitement had been the result. A search party had been promptly

organized, Sol constituting himself as leader, Mick and Tim lagging in the rear, a laugh up their sleeves.

A small wooden chess pawn proved the reward of much energy.

Sol was disgusted, baffled; Mick was loud in vague surmises. In Sol's company Tim was discreetly silent, but voiced diverse opinions abroad.

Thomas was laughed at by the men, much to his boyish indignation.

"Dreamt it, yer did," said Sam, the card player.

He was nonplussed by a fierce blow in the eye, so that his tolerant and superior amusement gave way to spleen. Sol passing at the time, he perforce allowed Thomas to retreat triumphantly. Behind Sol's back, however, he made various malevolent signs. In pantomime he knocked Thomas's head off, broke his nose, cut his ears off, besides other doughty and blood-thirsty deeds, the accomplishment of which Thomas frustrated by glueing himself to the heels of Sol or Timothy.

Yet Sol was ever on the watch, and had made several surreptitious visits to the old house, more tumble-down and dilapidated than ever. On one occasion he had fancied someone followed him—not a very pleasant imagination

when one is alone in the depths of the bush—but in the end he had believed himself to be under an hallucination. He might not have felt so secure had he seen Tim's malicious face peering at him from the hollow of a burnt-out wild apple.

Filled with inward query Sol left the men to thrash out the matter of the robbery to their own satisfaction, while he walked to and fro in the shadow of the trees, the fire of his pipe glowing like some aimless firefly.

CHAPTER XXII

Revenge

CHRISTMAS came and went. Tarawingee was garnished with boughs of wild cherry and lilli-pilli, sassafras, and ironwood, and long bulrushes from the creek. Merry voices floated from room to room, for the boys had returned from school, each with a boon companion. The plum trees rustled with delight, and the pomegranate hedge stretched mute arms wide in welcome.

The rush and onslaught of youth stirred Tarawingee to life again. It had grown strangely stagnant since the elections. Trouble dwelt in Mrs. Marchmont's anxious eyes, and as she watched her husband sink from bitter disappointment into silent, dull apathy, the trouble deepened and became abiding.

The holidays brought home to her the fact that to her sons she must take the place of both parents. As a matter of fact, she always had, but until now she had been unconscious of it.

His chosen aim in life frustrated so disastrously, Mr. Marchmont allowed the in-

fluences which for years had been undermining his character to gain upon him. He lost interest in decorating his house; unnoticed, vases became cracked and broken; gilt pictures grew tarnished; a cuckoo clock ceased to work; the piano stood locked.

His sons did not notice the difference in any great degree. In a way he had always lived apart, had always been wrapped in some vague dream unintelligible to the busy brain of youth. Only Benjamin noticed that Sol seemed more careful over what they did and checked them oftener than of yore in their mad escapades; saw, too, that his mother turned to Sol for information, seeking the old stockman's help in many things.

The vintage came and passed. Feeling unequal to the strain of carrying the usual festivities through, Mrs. Marchmont issued no invitations, and the passing of the vintage saw only the grape-pickers departing wearily.

A little late, however, Mrs. Marchmont sent one invitation. It was to Agnes Wiseman. Agnes was to be married in the spring. Mrs. Marchmont wished her to stay a while at Tarawingee before she went to the new home so far away. The girl's presence rested her. In that quiet happiness dwelling in the blue eyes she read again her own girlish dreams, hopes,

aspirations. Sincerely she hoped that Agnes's might be fulfilled, might abide with her for ever. Her own proud heart, yearning over that wreck of manhood for ever brooding in his study, thrust her dreams aside, and buried them, sealing them bravely with unshed tears. She must face the future courageously, must guide her sons through life—above all things, must teach them to be master of themselves. Sometimes. watching a thin bent figure wandering aimlessly up and down the cemented pathway, her eyes would suddenly blur, and the ache in her soul become too great to be borne. Her pride in him lay shattered; her love remained; on that what a strain was put! But to it she clung, knowing that without it life were indeed worthless, a place of sand and ashes.

The June holidays were almost upon them before Agnes left.

This time Benjamin returned with a prize for mathematics and a determination to accompany Sol on another trip to Wilton. Thomas was to spend a portion of his holidays at the home of a friend.

The night was keen with frost as Benjamin again rode forth with Sol in the wake of a lowing mob of cattle. They were taking them to the sale next day, a sale which was bringing buyers from many distant parts.

A fairly prosperous season along the coast had set many a struggling farmer more securely on his feet, and everyone seemed to want to stock their paddocks as fast and as soon as possible. This was the biggest mob of fats Sol had brought down for many a day, hence his spirits were somewhat effervescent, and his talk referred to the mighty deeds of his youth.

Benjamin, idly listening, the sense of slow movement perhaps winging his thoughts the faster, remembered that first glorious trip, its wonder, its breathless glamour. Through what fairy spectacles he had gazed, and was still gazing! Perhaps now the stars blinked more knowingly, yet the trees, dark blurs, still seemed like grotesque figures slipping silently away into the darkness, the call of mopoke and curlews still heard with ghostly mysteriousness.

To-night great clouds were fast obscuring the moon, but as fast as they rose to the zenith a high overhead wind whisked them away in a south-easterly direction, revealing now and then a glimpse of star-studded sky or a thin wedge of the moon's cold disc. Once a koala, or native bear, called suddenly from a tree. So unexpected was it that Benjamin was startled, but the horses and cattle took not the least notice of it, though the sound was curiously weird and strange. Once, too, the air was fanned with the

long flight of flying-foxes, and occasionally a heavier bird flew by, its wings flapping loudly in a slow and dignified manner.

In the small hours of the morning the mob was turned into the cattle reserve, a mile or so out of Wilton.

Feeling thirsty, Sol lit a fire and untied the billy from his saddle, and through the shadows sought the creek gurgling a short distance away. The fire's glow cast his long form into black relief as he disappeared under the trees. As he went two or three horsemen rode past. They were mounted police returning home after a protracted patrolling of the mountain settlements. Since the robbery the police had been on the alert. One man suspected of being the ringleader had been brought to account, but nothing being proved against him, he had been set at large again. As the troops rode past they saw Benjamin stooping over the fire, hailed him and rode on, the ring of their horses' iron-shod feet echoing back in faint music, their swiftly moving forms quickly swallowed in the gloom.

Then Sol reappeared, the billy was boiled, tea, black and fragrant, was quaffed. The dogs came and crouched in the warm ring of the fire, their eyes, green and glassy, closing and unclosing in intense enjoyment of its comfort. Sol, too, stretched his long limbs and smoked the

pipe of content, while Benjamin sat over the fire like a blackfellow, letting the warmth permeate through his numbed limbs and stir the chilled blood to better circulation.

The yellow flames leaped high, throwing a fluctuating, flickering light upon the shrubs close by; old logs fell apart, and ashes dropped with infinitesimal sounds, like a maiden's faint sighs. Sol's deep set eyes were fixed broodingly upon the fire.

Benjamin yawned mightily as he looked at him. "Doing some deep thinking Sol?" he asked, rubbing the shaggy coat of his favourite dog.

"Um," drawled Sol, moodily. "I was jest thinkin'."

Benjamin laughed softly, boyishly. "Of what, Sol?" he asked.

"'O the time I was merried," said Sol.

"Married! You never told me you were married!" expostulated Benjamin, in amazement.

"I'm perty deep," muttered Sol, testily. He hated explanations. But, as Benjamin evidently waited for some, he began.

"Yer see, 'twas this way. Afore yer father come to Tarawingee old Jack Gibb had the place, an' he had a cook. My! but she could cook!" murmured Sol, reminiscently.

"Yes," said Benjamin, quickly.

"Me an' Mick," said Sol, "were 'er sweet-'earts, as they loviers call one another." In the firelight Sol grinned sheepishly. A long pause, as he mentally reviewed his prowess in the gentle art of love. "An' I won," he said, suddenly.

"But where is she?" queried Benjamin.

Sol shook his head. "I dunno," he grumbled. "She was older'n I, and when I up and spoke to her one day for some fool thing she'd done, why, she went bag and baggage, and I arn't heard of her from that day ter this. Comes a' gittin' merried I s'pose. Men is fools, no doubt; but sometimes I b'lieve I'd give the chestnut colt for a plate o' her doughnuts. She be a rare cook in 'er day. P'raps she arn't dead yet," he added, thereby showing that he entertained hopes of finding his long-lost spouse.

"Where did she live?" asked Benjamin, who was just as serious as Sol.

"She said she come from Kilkenny," said Sol; "but when I went there ter fetch 'er back, no one knew nothink about 'er."

"Strange," said Benjamin, thoughtfully.

"I've had some coorious experiences in my life," agreed Sol, relapsing into determined silence.

Benjamin respected it. Sol's confidence

proved that the man had at last admitted him to that high plane on which he moved—that mighty plane of manhood. The boy's face glowed with pride and a great tenderness for the old stockman.

The fire was dwindling to red coal when suddenly, and without warning, a stranger appeared out of the darkness and stood in the circle of light. He was enveloped in a heavy oil coat, with a soft felt hat pulled over his face, while about the lips a particularly long moustache drooped. Roused from reverie Sol eyed this apparition doubtfully and with due suspicion. Benjamin too stared curiously.

"It's cold," said the stranger, casually.

"So 'tis," grunted Sol, inhospitably.

Benjamin threw more wood on the fire. "Come and warm yourself," he invited. "It's the coldest night we've had yet. Are you making for the sale?"

The stranger needed no second invitation, but came close to the fire, keeping his face turned from Sol's.

"To-morrow, ain't it?" he questioned, in a soft slow voice that somehow struck a vibrant chord of memory in Sol's brain.

While he rummaged in the lumber chamber of forgotten things, the stranger warmed him-

self and spoke in a slow drawl to Benjamin, still keeping his face out of Sol's range of vision.

Such persistency aggravated the head stockman. He shifted his position, but as he moved, the stranger moved.

Presently, with a swift shrug of the shoulders, the man rose, and, with an abrupt "Good night," disappeared into the gloom as strangely and unexpectedly as he had appeared.

"Rum chap," said Benjamin, staring after him.

Sol was silent. Memory was stirring and seething within him.

Suddenly a curious blood-curdling cry broke upon the night. Like lightning Sol bounded to the corner where the horses were tethered. Surprised, Benjamin followed. In the darkness he heard Sol moving about, cursing savagely, a note of fear in his voice. As Benjamin groped after him a chill wind sprang to life, and the thick blackness changed to a vague grey. Salient landmarks became visible, the dim blur of trees edging the creek showed faintly, the cattle scattered about the reserve became huge, hardly perceptible blots. Benjamin's horse was cropping the herbage just near him, and a little to the left was a strangely shapen blur, silent and very still.

"What is it, Sol?" called Benjamin, waking to the fact that something unusual had taken

place. He struck a match, and by its lurid flare caught sight of Sol's face.

The match out, Benjamin stood speechless. He had surprised great tears rolling down Sol's rugged face. Beside him the chestnut colt lay motionless, its eyes white and horrid.

Gradually the light grew. Benjamin touched Sol gently on the shoulder. Stiffly the man rose, curses in his throat, murder in his eye. "A course he knowed he liked it," he muttered. "The hell brute has poisoned him with a bit o' bread."

CHAPTER XXIII

The Skeleton in the Marchmont Cupboard

AS Benjamin and Sol had been moving slowly in the direction of Wilton, a horseman had been riding hard towards Tarawingee. He came from the mountains; the wind blew his thick white beard about his face and curled the ends of his thin fine hair.

Henry Marchmont, brooding and listless in his study, little guessed what the night would bring him. Inert he sat in his arm chair. In the fireplace the fire had died down until only a few coals remained glowing beneath their layer of ash. On the fender the old cockatoo slept motionless as a carven image.

It was surely an unsound nature, a nature unaware of its own depths and resources that should allow circumstances to so kill the life forces. A blighting wind had seemingly swept across Henry Marchmont while life was yet full and ripe, shrivelling ambition, changing the whole outward man. That the inner man was not at peace with the change was plainly discernible in the restless eyes and hands.

Following upon his ignominious defeat, slowly but very surely that terrible apathy settled upon him.

The blow had found him unprepared; its unexpectedness, its utterness had been cruel, biting. He could not understand that from those to whom he had given of his best he should receive this. Each little school helped forward now mocked him; each small wooden church, erected mainly through his efforts, pointed accusingly. From every man whom he had assisted he shrank back afraid. What else would they do? In what other way did they mean to hurt him?

Always his mind groped pitifully about the one thing. Never did he recognize that in himself lay the answer. So he read and drank, and drank and read, wearily, as though life had grown almost too insupportable for this. Sometimes Mick came and played cribbage with him, sometimes Tim played chess, more often he passed the evening in a semi-stupor. Occasionally Sol came and smoked with him. But to the head stockman the change was inexplicable and totally incomprehensible; always he departed swearing violently under his breath.

The wind was sighing mournfully in the pines when the door of the study opened and Mrs. Marchmont came in. She crossed the room

swiftly and bent over that listless figure sitting huddled in the chair.

"Henry," she said, softly.

Henry Marchmont moved wearily. "Yes, Louisa?" he asked, querulously.

"It is late. Do you wish to retire?"

He did not answer her. Only the long fingers plucked nervously at the arm of the chair, his staring eyes still fixed on the dying coals.

"Henry." His wife sought again to rouse him. "Benjamin and Sol have gone to Wilton to-night."

The restless fingers pulled a cane from the chair and let it drop to the floor. On the fender Cocky stirred and muttered, "Grapes, grapes! Can't you 'ear me?"

The wind went sobbing past the windows, and still Henry Marchmont was dumb.

Tears were rising fast to Louisa Marchmont's eyes; the kind mouth trembled with her emotion.

"Ah, Henry, Henry." Her yearning whisper filled with pathos, tenderness, love, echoed through the silent room, as bending low, her lips brushed his hot forehead.

She had gone and the baffled wind murmured harshly without the door. A tiny clock ticked the hours. Slowly time slipped away, and the hands pointed to twelve. Suddenly a low tapping sounded above the wind. It roused the

man in front of the dead fire. Rising unsteadily he opened the door, and the man without came in and stood in the dim glow of the lamp. The wind blew the door to, for Henry Marchmont's hand had fallen from the handle, nerveless, shaking as he stared at the stranger.

The man in the centre of the room stared back at him, a curious smile raising his prominent cheekbones, wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

"Who am I?" he queried, tossing his hat aside.

Shaking from head to foot, Marchmont stumbled to a chair. "Who are you?" he repeated vaguely.

The stranger laughed, a careless mocking laugh that grated insensibly on the wreck of manhood watching. He sat down, pulled the decanter towards him, filled a glass and drank slowly.

"Your wine has deteriorated somewhat, Henry," he remarked, pleasantly. "It used to be excellent stuff; but," shaking his head thoughtfully, "it will go to the wall like yourself, Henry."

Still Marchmont was silent.

"Come, come, you surely know me," said the stranger.

"I know you," said Henry Marchmont, dully.

"Doubtless you wonder how I came to be here," said his visitor, lazily pulling out pipe and

tobacco. "I'll tell you, Henry, in my own good time. Meanwhile, let's smoke the pipe of peace."

The jumbled brain of Henry Marchmont groped pitifully for its old clearness, and presently, he too, fumbled for his pipe.

"The wheel of time has turned often since I saw you, Henry. Then you were young, eager, full of spirit, though not quite such a dare-devil as your brother—eh, Henry? Ah, well, we were wild dogs, and I never got beyond those mad student days, and perhaps you do not care to be reminded of your villainous twin brother—felon, forger, etc., etc. What a long list, Henry?"

"Tell me all, Arthur," said Henry Marchmont, huskily, resolutely restraining from refilling his own glass.

"My time is short," said Arthur Marchmont, "very short," glancing at his watch.

"The pater's?" said his brother, quickly, glancing almost eagerly at it.

"Same old ticker, Henry. That and the chessboard have been my constant friends since I broke the gaoler's head and decamped with his daughter. She never knew, poor girl. She thought it was the other one. It didn't matter much, Henry. She died a year after the little girl came. It's about her that I'm here to-night."

"Where is she?" queried his brother, earnestly.

Arthur Marchmont laughed again. "Waking up, Henry? What do you do with yourself since—"

Henry Marchmont winced, then suddenly sat upright in his chair. "Stop," he said, so abruptly and with such unexpected force that Arthur Marchmont paused.

"Sore point, Henry," he remarked, after a while. "Couldn't be helped. Your opinions were against mine."

"Yours?" echoed Henry Marchmont, vaguely.

"Yes, mine, Henry. I have big interests in this American tobacco industry. You don't credit it, eh? True, nevertheless; but I didn't come here to talk business, but to speak of my girl—your niece, Henry."

"Where is she?" queried his brother, still more earnestly.

Arthur Marchmont laughed again, then frowned suddenly as he studied the man before him.

"The same sickness that I succumbed to has seized you, Henry—rather late in life, creeping on for years, I expect. Queer, isn't it? That deadly apathy that assails one, that pessimism that makes the whole world stagnant, the listlessness that at last goads one to desperation, so that the bizarre and incomprehensible happen to astonish the more evenly balanced folk. I

don't think you're dangerous, Henry, still one never knows." He stopped thoughtfully, puffing at his pipe and watching his brother curiously.

From slow scrutiny of his brother's face his gaze wandered to the handsome vases on the mantelpiece, the delicate pictures on the walls, to a strange carven cabinet of rosewood with its ornaments of polished ivory and mother o' pearl.

"Tell me all, Arthur," said Henry Marchmont again.

"Timothy is still with you?" asked his brother, irrelevantly.

Marchmont nodded.

"A sad rogue, Henry, but a faithful friend. For years now I have lived in the mountains, shifting from corner to corner. Once I resided in Old Willoughby's mansion until you in your zeal sent me flying. Just got away in time; but I lost a pawn in the hurried exit—too bad for you, Henry. You've heard of Longbeard of the Hills"—mentioning a bushranger who at various times had figured prominently in melees with the police. "How should you guess it was your own brother?"

Henry Marchmont stared at him in a strained, fascinated way. Longbeard, that reckless outcast, was his brother Arthur—the wild headstrong boy who, as a medical student had

forged his father's name, had escaped his gaoler, at the same time brazenly eloping with the gaoler's pretty daughter. The whole affair had been hushed up as much as possible. It had broken his parents' hearts, for, though wild and wayward, his was an intensely lovable nature. Some inborn gift secured him friends, whether he would or no, nor did he hesitate to make use of them. With the rest of his family Henry Marchmont had believed him long since dead.

Arthur Marchmont moved slightly in his chair and leaned almost affectionately towards his brother. "Naturally I did not confine myself to one particular spot. A person of my temperament needs constant change. Life grows insufferable without a fillip now and then. When Tim and I sailed for San Francisco in the American schooner 'Pegasus' we had plenty. First the crew mutinied—a bad lot, Henry, fit only for hell. Tim was steward. I and the child and two old coves were the only passengers. Tim warned me of the fun brewing. The Japanese cook murdered the captain on the high seas, and the ship for a few hours became Bedlam. You see, everyone wanted to be captain then. Things were pretty hot until one of them discovered that the old tub was on fire —from Bedlam to Pandemonium, Henry. They blamed Tim and me for starting the fire, and in

the excitement we got away in a cockle shell of a boat. Don't know what became of the two old coves or the rest of them. Tired, Henry?" —as his brother sighed deeply in his astonishment, his hands moving restlessly in the direction of the decanter.

"It was two days before the French trader picked us up. But our troubles were not over then. She was making out here, and in the middle of a foggy night she split on the Devil's Rocks, in Stephen's Bay. Dark Ben found Tim, the child, the Portuguese, who was one of the crew, and me floating on the mizzenmast hours after—wonderful what that child has pulled through, Henry, but it was a sorry day for Ben when he rescued the Portuguese. Lost sight of you, Henry, until one day I saw your name figuring in some big case. Then a year or two later Tim tells me he is going to throw up outdoor life and take a position under Henry Marchmont of Tarawingee. I knew it must be you, Henry, so I came to investigate, and then went to the hills with a few of my friends—for I have many scattered in various parts of different countries. We often sampled your wine, Henry. As Mick said, it was excellent stuff some time ago."

"Mick, too!" gasped Henry Marchmont.

His brother took no notice, but glanced at his

watch. "I must be gone in a quarter of an hour," he said. "Troopers disturbed us to-night. I am weary of life, Henry, so I make preparation for the end. My little Eunice lives with a Zillah Mann, near the Dutchman's Nose, thirty miles from Wilton. Dark Ben, her father, and I are old friends. I am on my way to see him now. You will care for her, Henry?" a half dubious look coming into his eyes.

"I cannot go for her," said Henry Marchmont. "If the woman brings her here, she will not want; or I will send Sol."

"Thank you, Henry, thank you. A week from to-day she will be ready. And now I must be gone. The troopers have been on my heels half an hour back. Because of a row in his miserable tavern a dirty skunk named Bean has turned Queen's evidence and divulged our camping places, denounced me, and claimed the long standing reward upon my head. It is sometimes embarrassing to be renowned, eh, Henry?"

A sudden, swift shower of rain beat upon the roof, the wind rattled doors and windows; in the garden the eerie sough of the pines rose and fell and rose again, until the voices of the night seemed to mingle in one long-drawn-out screech.

It was morning before Henry Marchmont woke from his stupor, and searching earnestly about the room knew that his brother had gone.

CHAPTER XXIV

Arthur Marchmont's Last Adventure

"ZILLAH, there be some'un at the door." Dark Ben's voice was husky, for the morning moisture had crept into his lungs as he crouched in his chair over the glowing embers, mumbling and spitting, spitting and mumbling. "The souls," he muttered, "they're callin' me I tell you. I heerd 'em in the night and early this morn. Hark to them now, Zillah," as a furious blast of wind shook the little cottage and rattled a loose sheet of zinc on the roof. "Ay, but I be old now," grumbled the old man, peering round for his daughter. He had crept from his bed to crouch over the fire much earlier than usual.

Zillah was not yet awake, the outer door was locked, and the knocking on it was continuous.

"P'raps 'tis the souls," he mumbled, and rising stiffly, lifted a corner of the window-blind and peeped out. What he saw sent him groping to the door. "Ay, ay, 'twas the souls, I heerd sure enough," he muttered. The door slipped from

his gnarled fingers and Arthur Marchmont entered.

"Are you ready Ben?" he asked abruptly.

"Ay, I be ready, boy," said the old man. "I heerd 'em calling in the night an' I says to the Portuguese, 'I'm coming soon-soon,' an' to George, I says, 'Keep quiet an' still till I'm done.' "

"Eunice?" said Marchmont. "I must see her before we go." He went to a low door, opened it gently and looked in at the slim young form lying beneath the bed clothes. "She is well provided for," he muttered. "Better she should stay here than come with me to America."

"Bean't you goin' to kiss her?" mumbled Dark Ben, peering in also. "I will not waken her Ben. Come, the boat is ready. It is well Zillah sleeps heavily. We should reach the point in less than three hours. Can we make it in this wind?"

"Ay, ay, lad; we'll make it," answered the old man with a chuckle of excitement. He opened the outer door as he spoke.

Out into the thick mist of rain they went. Like a dense grey blanket it swept over the tumbling waters of the lake and the bay, shut off the trees and low-lying hills, smothered the Dutchman's Nose and almost hid the shore, the long black jetties and the rocking boats of the

fisher folk. They found the boat straining at its moorings.

"Are you ready Ben?" repeated Marchmont earnestly. "We may never make the Point."

The eyes of the two men met in a strange smile of understanding.

"Ay, ay, I be ready," replied Dark Ben cheerily. "I be very skittish this mornin'. Pull away, lad."

The boat shot out into the seething waters, the wind caught the light sail and the rain blurred them almost immediately from sight.

When Zillah rose an hour later, the storm of wind and rain was rising into a screech of rage that boded ill for the little boat tossing somewhere on the face of that green surging water. Lifting the debris strewn upon the shore, the wind caught it high and carried it pell-mell across the sand, flinging it among the low shrubs of honeysuckle and broom with savage fury. Wide grey sheets of sand came swirling up and dashed themselves in baffled frenzy against the windows and walls of the cottage which shook to its foundations. Even Mrs. Marriott's house, standing on its hill above the shore, rocked and trembled, and the old lady stared anxiously from an upper window upon the torment of the outside world. Now and again she caught sight of Dark Ben's chimney; then it would be smothered

in mist and sand, and the fury of the storm would come hurtling up the hill to fall, like a thousand furies upon her own home.

From her cottage window, Zillah stared at the tumbling seething water which came crawling, running, leaping up to her very door. Her lips were drawn in a long thin line, her dark eyes blazed in a set white face. Behind her, in the fireplace, the fire spluttered and struggled to burn, but the spume from the sea, sinking down the chimney, dampened and choked it. She shivered, and a cold sweat broke out upon her forehead and hands.

"Curse him," she muttered.

Drawing a chair to the window, she sat down and rested her elbows upon the sill, staring, staring out at the sea and sky and sand until something of her innerself seemed to pass from the cottage and rush out into the heart of the storm. Always she sought that old man with the red bleared eyes and the cunning smile hovering about his lips. What mattered the other? Why had she slept so heavily this morning of all mornings? With a strange savage cry, she rose, and knocking over the chair in her fury of mind and soul, flung the hat, which Arthur Marchmont had left on the table upon the fire. A thick smoke filled the little room and the smell of burning felt. Like a

wild thing caged against it will, the woman walked about the room tearing her hair and clothes in her frenzy of heart breaking inaction.

Timidly the child opened the inner door and called her. But Zillah was once more seated before the window with her staring eyes fixed upon that mass of seething water raging without. Shivering with fear and cold the child crept back to bed.

Towards mid-day Zillah moved from her chair at the window and crouched over the smoking fire. The child came out and searching in the cupboard found some food. Zillah did not heed her, and presently she tip-toed back into the inner room and shut the door.

The tide crawled up to the door of the cottage and crept in over the floor. Sometimes the sound of knocking sounded upon the door. Zillah did not move. It was but the drifting wood flung up by the tide. She heard only the moan of wind, rain and water, saw only the figure of an old man being dashed against the jagged points of the Devil's Rocks, flung high and sucked down, down into that boiling cauldron of green, leaping water and frothing foam. How many years had she lived in this wild seaside spot to save him from this. Only to be foiled at last. Would to God she had betrayed Arthur Marchmont years ago.

And still the knocking sounded on the door. Once only she rose and stood listening. But it seemed to have gone again and she sat staring once more at the embers of the fire. When night fell she still sat there. The wind had fallen, the rain had gone, the sea growled in its sullen anger. Far off against the Devil's Rocks the waves leaped high and fierce, and the boom of the outer ocean sounded in a savage undertone. The rising moon cast an uncanny glow over everything. Zillah rose and, unbarring the door, stood upon her threshold. There, a little to the left of the cottage door, lay the shattered remains of an open boat. The name still glistened on its prow. . . . So this was what had knocked against her door. She shuddered and flung both hands across her eyes which seemed to burn like balls of fire in her head. The sob of the receding tide became a living voice that spoke and told her the whole story of that small broken boat and the fate of those who had gone forth into the storm.

So had 'The souls' called and taken Dark Ben to themselves. So had Arthur Marchmont cut himself adrift from life.

. . . . . .

When Sol came a week later to the cottage, he found it deserted, the door blown open, grey ashes, cold and dead upon the hearth.

CHAPTER XXV

The Mystery Grows Clearer

THE troopers did indeed discover much when they followed Bean into the hills. They found two small deserted caves filled with empty kegs, cooking utensils and debris. They found a sequestered coining plant, they discovered private gallows for the slaughtering of stolen stock, they accidentally came across a mother-o'-pearl chessboard wedged securely in a crevice between two rocks—in short they had come upon the lair of a noted bushranger of years past. His prominent exploits had been of erratic occurrence, long periods elapsing between each, and always many miles between each foray.

Of late years most people had believed "Longbeard of the Hills" to be dead. Since Bean had so unexpectedly turned traitor to that wide ring which had so successfully baffled justice for many years, numerous families in the different settlements had dwindled unaccountably. "Dad" or "Brother Bill" had gone to some distant

diggings in the night, so that their going might not be commented upon.

Mrs. Heineman was loud in her lamentation when Hal, chancing upon the settlement, "t'other side of the brush," found her in that two-story public house, the historic home of her girlhood. He heard that Joe had got up in the night and gone to Victoria.

"To the diggings, sir, and no less; an' he as always said people was mad to go runnin' after the root of all evil—them's his own words, sir. Gold, a course 'e meant. An' now he's gone too, along with Andrew Shilling and Tom Hooligan —went without sayin' a word to anyone. Leastways, Joe never said nothing to me, his own wife, sir. I wouldn't 'a' thought it o' Joe—that I wouldn't."

Mrs. Heineman was not the only one who was left lamenting. Mick's wife was likewise deserted for a period; but Mick, being fond of good cooking, soon slouched back into his own warm kitchen, where the bacon hung to the smoke-blackened rafters, and the pumpkins and golden gammas were stacked in the corner near the settle.

Tim, too, had taken French leave and had decamped from Tarawingee. Sol grinned sourly as he listened to the "boys' " vague surmises as to where Tim had gone. Few were taken into

custody, very few; and those were eventually let off with a slight sentence.

Where "Longbeard," the leader, had disappeared to was a mystery to many. But gradually his name died out and the hills knew him no more. Tim knew, and he felt that life had become strangely lonely, hence his surreptitious disappearance from Tarawingee. Ere long the news filtered back through various channels that Tim was cook on a small boat on the Darling.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Fight on the Plateau

SEATED in the back parlor of the "Blue Maid," Bean laboriously deciphered the letter he had received that morning. He looked anything but happy. His education had suffered in early youth, and the arts of reading and writing had not been studied since.

Yet the letter was not long. It briefly stated that Sergeant Biggs, who had lately been appointed to Wilton, would call on him that night seeking his aid and advice on a matter of importance.

After due time, having spelt out and assimilated the news, Bean indulged in mental retrospection. A cunning smile played about his lips, yet his eyes were shiftless and uneasy as he glanced ever and anon about the room. Since he had cut himself adrift so completely from old friends and acquaintances, his hold on life had been no sinecure. Several times incensed men had aimed revolvers in his direction; one did indeed shoot, but, courage failing at the last, the bullet went into the air. Yet Bean felt that he

had performed an act almost of heroism in denouncing his old comrades.

Why had they crossed him? He had his own opinions; he meant to keep them.

Bean rambled nervously about the room, listening to every sound, every voice raised outside. He practically spent his life in this close-smelling back parlor, stiff with its horsehair chairs and buttoned sofa. The window looking on to the street was perforce kept closed. Consequently his temper had not improved by having only a couple of painted dead birds to gaze at. This visit of Biggs promised recreation. Bean found himself looking forward to it almost eagerly. In time the hour specified by Biggs drew near. When at length he came, the back parlor was brilliant with two oil lamps and a couple of candles. Bean had grown strangely afraid of the dark.

Soon Bean learned that the Government had reason to suspect much of Andrew du Longueville, who had lately planted himself an orchard on top of a great plateau between Kilkenny and Wilton. The Government sought his assistance. Bean swelled with pride at the thought, and with Biggs went to the stable, where he saddled his horse in feverish haste to prove his loyalty at least to someone.

As they rode into the night Sergeant Biggs

spoke little, but Bean was garrulous with the sense of his own importance. The night was dark, but the heavens were lit with a labyrinth of stars, and from north to south the Milky Way trailed resplendent.

Soon the riders left the high road to plunge into a bush track leading between dense walls of forest. Black, impenetrable it rose on every side, a faint strip of starlit sky showing above. On, on, the forest breaking sometimes, closing again denser and blacker than before.

The horses went more slowly now, picking their way carefully. Once Sergeant Bigg's horse caught its foot and tripped, but, with a quick soft call, its rider pulled it back in time and plunged after Bean. Had the latter seen the curious smile with played beneath the false moustache of the man behind him, he might have faltered in his course. As it was, he went on unconscious of the identity of the 'Sergeant Biggs.'

In time they came to the foot of the plateau, found the narrow winding path leading to the top and began the steep ascent. Half way up they tethered the horses and went the rest of the way on foot.

It was near midnight, but a light glowered from the window, and from under the doorway of the new log cabin, built on the very edge of

the plateau. Creeping cautiously near, Bean looked in at the window, while Biggs reconnoitred at the rear of the house.

Old Andrew du Longueville was bending over the table studying a map, his pipe between his teeth, his hands caressing the long beard reaching to his chest. Bean looked closer. In another corner of the room a woman sat crochetting, the light falling across her silvery hair in ripples of dull gold. It was the old man's wife.

As Bean gazed, striving to make out the map, he saw another woman open a door and stand on the threshold. Younger than the other she also was grey-haired, but taller, gaunter, and restless-eyed. Bean became uneasy as he watched her. A slight noise behind him sent him from the window. Sergeant Biggs, minus coat and hat and false moustache, stood behind him with a great log of wood poised above his head.

"Judas!" he hissed at the gaping hotel-keeper.

With a snarl like that of a wild beast trapped Bean was upon him. The wood rolled to the edge of the plateau and fell. Both men heard it go bumping down, down, down, the sound of its fall becoming fainter and fainter, the farther and faster it went. And as the log fell they grappled together more like fiends than men. Now one

had the upper hand, now the other. As they struggled there on the edge of the precipice the door of the cabin opened, and shutting it behind him, Andrew du Longueville stood watching.

"Remember the grip I taught you, Jacques," he whispered, in a deep tense undertone as the men writhed before him.

Eager, excited, bloodthirsty, the old man watched them. Ha! Jacques would revenge them all. Jacques was a man, not a miserable crawling traitor. Jacques, his son, would kill the vermin.

To and fro, sinuous and strong, knowing that it was for life or death, the writhing combatants struggled. Both were strong active men. If any held the advantage it was Bean.

Cautiously old Andrew crept near them, a thin pole in his hands. If he could but trip the innkeeper? It was risky, but Jacques was weakening a little. Andrew's eyes were quick, and Bean must not triumph.

The pole shot out, there was a wild blood-curdling yell of awful fear and rage, and suddenly both men rolled backwards, over the edge of the precipice, clawing the air desperately with frantic outstretched arms, uttering language that scorched the blackness of the night to horrid luridness.

Andrew fell to the ground, deathly still, as the

door of the hut opened timidly and a woman's head showed darkly against the light. Over all the terrible silence of the bush fell, broken soon by a woman's wild shrieks of horror.

In the morning the gaunt, grey-haired woman woke the young girl sleeping in the inner room, whispering in her ear, "Awake, awake, child; the sun rides high, and we have far to go." Turning away she muttered to herself, "It is the devil's world."

Unknown to him, Sol was at last avenged. likewise his star was slowly rising.

CHAPTER XXVII

Zillah's Return

SOL had come to render account of his management to Mrs. Marchmont, who was sewing on the wide stone verandah. Cattle were selling well, the price of Tarawingee wines had not yet fallen. Sol thought more cultivation might prove profitable.

Beneath them, sitting astride his fat taffy pony, Thomas listened lazily. He had come home a day or two before. Next week he would return with Benjamin to school. Lazy nonchalance and carelessness of all Life's seriousness as yet dwelt in his boyish, dreamy eyes. As each day passed he drank its fullness to the dregs with deep unconscious delight. The world was a great haunted palace of unconquered things. Some day he would wake from his dreams and put on his armour to go forth to conquer. Unlike Benjamin he was not fully aware of his own capabilities, had not quite determined which course he meant to take, hence a certain hesitancy in his manner, a wistfulness in his young inscrutable eyes.

As he gazed over the paddocks, he was aware of the approach of strangers. They drew nearer, and he saw one was a woman, the other a young girl. Thomas became interested. He flicked his pony so that he faced them more squarely.

The girl showed signs of fatigue, drooping in her saddle as a tender flower wilts beneath the sun. The woman sat erect, her eyes straining forward as though searching for something. Curiosity leapt to the boy's eyes. Sol and his mother had not noticed their approach. Pricking his pony he went forward to meet them.

Zillah did not stop as he drew near. "This is Tarawingee?" she asked, in her slow soft drawl. "This is where Mr. Marchmont still lives?"

"Yes, this is Tarawingee," answered Thomas, wondering a little.

"It is well," said Zillah. "We have travelled far, the future still holds our welcome. Courage, Eunice," turning to the girl. "We have reached our journey's end. Take comfort."

The girl raised her head and Thomas knew her again.

He saw a sweet flushed face, oval and very fair, made beautiful by eyes sparkling and grey. Even her weariness had not quenched their brilliance. As he gazed some inner door within his soul swung slowly open, revealing to him many things. Life received a sudden im-

petus, voices hitherto unfamiliar called softly, mysteriously; unseen hands beckoned, the future clamored for remembrance.

Unconsciously they had approached the high verandah. Suddenly Thomas saw that his mother had dropped her sewing and was standing waiting; that Sol was staring most strangely at the gaunt woman on the grey big-boned horse.

"Zillah!"

Sol's voice was harsh and unfamiliar even to himself.

The woman dismounted slowly, her eyes fixed almost rebelliously on Sol, who seemed powerless to move.

"I've come back again," she said at last, in her lazy liquid drawl.

Sol woke to life. "I'm merried to 'er all right," he told his mistress, as he slipped past her and vaulted the iron railing.

The young girl alone appeared forgotten. Thomas flung himself from his pony and edging near her said diffidently, "I'll help you down."

With a sigh of relief the girl took her foot from the stirrup, and, placing it within his open palm, slipped to the ground.

Thomas caught her as she stumbled and swayed on stiff tired limbs.

As he helped her up the steps he heard Zillah's

hurried explanations, Sol's deep voice of gladness, his mother's perplexity gave way to decided pleasure. Her husband had told her all, and for some time past the added worry had robbed her of sleep.

Now the girl was here. The future might at least hold some comfort. She would love her as a daughter; perhaps in time the child would return that affection and care for her as a mother.

Two big tears were very near Louisa Marchmont's eyes as she gathered the girl in her arms and took her into her heart.

As Thomas went slowly away to tell Benjamin, he heard Sol's voice raised in query: "Them doughnuts, Zillah? Kin yer still make them?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Happiness

AMONG the hills, winter passed and spring came. The anemones and the white cosmos were blooming in Annette's little garden when Guy Antrobus came and took Agnes away. Myrtle Parry, who had been staying with the Merryfields had ridden out the day before to see her store of pretty things and to say good-bye. And when they went to the orchard to gather some spicy-smelling quinces as a small present for Mrs. Merryfield, there was no one but a tender-hearted Agnes to see the beautiful wayward creature break suddenly into wild tears of bitter self reproach.

She had schemed to hurt Agnes—and God had taken his revenge.

Agnes folded her arms about her, trying to hush wild incoherent words, and shuddering as she learned of the black days and nights passed by the wretched, remorseful girl, whom all her world imagined heartlessly callous. Of her own black time she spoke not at all. The worst of that had passed, and she blamed no one; such

things must be the light and shade of existence, and a very real happiness seemed to be looming on her near horizon, curving the sweet lips to tiny fleeting smiles, deepening the dear blue eyes to the rich softness of a pansy.

Myrtle Parry had gone back to town with the little photo that had been carefully locked away in Agnes's desk in her possession. She needed it more than Agnes, for her grief and remorse was real and deep, and she had not the smallest remembrance to comfort her.

Next day when the last flutter of Agnes's handkerchief had disappeared behind the trees lining the road, Annette subsided in a tempest of tears into her mother's lap, and so taken up was she with her own violent and childish grief that the gentle tears raining upon her tangle of curls fell unheeded and unfelt.

Gilbert had retired to his room to calculate carefully when it might be possible for him to take unto himself a wife—he had several in his mind as he did it—and in the cellar beneath him, Lewis Wiseman busied himself for the rest of the day in concocting some hideous and vile-smelling preparation that he was sure, if put on the market, would make his fortune and kill all vicious insects that delighted in rambling about houses at night. He also speculated on the

possible length of time it would take his conscience to break through the many promises he had made his eldest daughter.

And while his courage was yet high, Hal caught Swagman and rode bravely to the white house standing in its flower-bright garden midway up the main street of Wilton. Having come so far, he would have turned back, overcome with conflicting emotions. But the glimpse of a slim, white-clad figure moving between the flowering shrubs decided him, and he entered the garden, with the love that would not be restrained, leaping in his pulses.

But swift fear, coupled with a great joy had sent that white-clad figure almost running into the house. Hurriedly Mavis mounted the wide, shallow stairs leading to that upper room where she so often sat sewing, weaving dreams between her stitches.

There he found her. Together! Ah! the dearness of the thought! What barriers could hold them apart? Mavis pricked her finger as she blindly strove to thread her needle. Above her she felt his eyes glow with all the fire and depth of that pent-up love to which he had refused utterance.

And Hal! Tender pictures, suddenly life-like, stepped one by one from the hidden galleries of

his mind, passing slowly and softly before his inner vision, so that he bent swiftly, and trembling with all the force of his love, drew her up to him until their lips met.

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